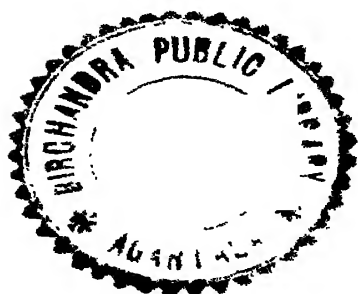


THE WINGED WITNESSES

THERESA BARR had always meant to return to Harbister, the lonely island in the Orkneys where she had served briefly during the war. Now a small legacy had made it possible and, camping out in the control tower of the island's derelict airfield, she was content with the prospect of a holiday with no other company than that of the elements, the sea birds and the solitary Flett family at Ham Farm. But the peace of Harbister was deceptive. On her first night Theresa was disturbed by a plane landing, but the next morning she could find no trace of it. Then her solitude was invaded again; this time by an engaging eccentric who described himself as an artist in dead man's shoes. Charles Poinfret was able to tell and show Theresa much of the inner life of Harbister, and soon she realised that she had stumbled into a macabre situation that was half vendetta, half the pursuit of justice. As the violent history of Harbister's few inhabitants—past and present—revealed itself, so Theresa became more deeply involved, drawn by the attraction of the amateur investigator and by her own discoveries and conjectures.

THE WINGED WITNESSES

Helen Robertson



MACDONALD: LONDON

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I

THE boatman, a young man with tight shaggy curls, high cheekbones and fierce grey eyes, lingered a few moments after I had landed, and I felt the pangs of a minor disillusionment. He did not look the part of the opportunist; I had thought him too romantic to haggle over the size of the tip I had given him.

"Isn't it enough?" I asked.

Immediately he turned back to the boat and pushed off, and I felt like the fop whose pony Shakespeare held after he had handed a *pourboire* to the bard. But as he did so he recovered his sense of humour and grinned at me. "You don't want to change your mind and come back to Mainland?" he asked. Mainland is the largest of the Orkney Islands, not the coast of Scotland. I shook my head, relieved that he was not offended.

"No thank you."

"There's always the farm at the south of the ham if you get lonely."

"What about Harbister? Is there no one there now?"

"They packed up over a twelve-month ago. But there's all the birds you'll ever want to see around Stack Head. And if you go to the jetty by the Ham Farm on Tuesday the mailboat'll call round at ten."

He pulled away from the beach, rowed out beyond the rocky horns of the tiny bay and started his engine. Breaking suddenly out of the peaceful sounds of the lapping water, it chugged like a panic-stricken heart that slowly quietened and steadied and at last faded peacefully away.

I walked up the track from the beach, thinking of Aunt Annie. She had boasted that it was a matter of indifference to her what coloured cotton she used on any sewing, for the stitches could never be seen. She had drawn a doll for me to cut out of cardboard. She painted delicate flowers on afternoon teacups and had embroidered an altar-cloth for the white marble church of St. Oswald. She had died on Boxing Day in the big three-storied Victorian house, forty years after her parents had died there, and her body had not been found till New Year's Eve.

But everything was in order; her hands were crossed on her breast and her will was under her pillow. The house had gone to her younger brother and the bulk of her little money had been divided between her five unmarried nieces. That was why I was here; I was one of the nieces—the only one, I reflected, who had inherited Aunt Annie's legacy in the spirit in which it had been left. For the others were all cut in the pattern of domesticity; two were already engaged to be married, two had not yet reached the age of consent. I felt that I alone understood the meaning of the gesture; there was a secret understanding between Aunt Annie and myself, though I had only once been to visit her. And so I had done what I thought she had intended us all to do: I had bought myself a few months' freedom from the treadmill and returned to the place to which, of all others, I had most often longed to return.

I had seen it once during the war. There had been an airfield here and I had spent a week on it, a week which I had passed dazed by my good fortune in landing in a place so unique and dramatically beautiful, so beloved by the birds whose habits had been my lifelong interest. Then I had been drafted again; it seems I had been sent there by mistake and was supernumerary. The place had

haunted me ever since like a missed opportunity, more beautiful by far than could be explained by any natural features now that it lay before me. And yet there was an amazed satisfaction in being there, like the achievement of a task which had seemed quite beyond one's powers, which more than compensated for any disappointment, and at the same time a feeling of anticlimax, as if I had no longer any reason for living.

The path from the beach had joined a narrow macadamized road, its surface pitted with pockets where ragwort and willowherb had lodged, and that had climbed to a hundred feet above the sea. Now there was a gradual slope spreading before me to the airfield and the farther coast a mile and a half away. To the east the island sank in ridges to a long shingly beach, and the Ham Farm jetty lay like a piece of driftwood on the sea; to the west it rose to a miniature mountain. On the farther side of this were the hundred-foot cliffs which I remembered and the house called Harbister where the signals section had been stationed. The island was tilted like a sinking ship, and there was not a single tree upon it.

A quarter of an hour's walking brought me to the edge of the airfield. It seemed, like the sleeping-beauty's palace, to have been calcified at the moment when all the little ships in the island harbours had blown their whistles and sirens in a heartfelt tribute to peace. Weeds were encroaching on the cracked runways and a flock of dunlins took flight before me, but the nissen huts, where I had hoped to shelter, still stood, their windows cracked and gaping, their iron outsides eaten by the rust. I selected one with the door still intact and pushed it open, but a sense of great dreariness closed down upon me like a fog when those iron walls confined my view. A battered iron bedstead was crumpled in the centre, and the entrails of its horsehair mattress had been strewn around

it by the rats. I left it and trekked along the main runway to the control tower standing a quarter of a mile away, a dirty concrete box stained by traces of camouflage with all its works outside, drainpipes and iron staircase and iron supports for lamps which had been removed. It smelt damp and musty, but inside there was a lavatory, and when I turned the taps of the handbasin water trickled out slowly and coursed a track through the grime, running red with rust at first but quickly coming clearer and faster. This was what I had been hoping for, and I left my pack in the entrance and went back to my landing-place for the sack of food I had brought with me.

To reach it I went through the largest hangar. There is always some part of a hangar rattling even when it is new, and this one clanged like a percussion orchestra. The rubbish which had littered the floors of the nissen huts had been swept aside here by the imprisoned winds and heaped up neatly in the corners. It looked almost as if it were inhabited, and I hurried through it feeling like Jonah in the belly of the whale. Outside, the bright sunlight dwarfed the building and reduced it again to dereliction.

Mr. Callendar had been pained by my leaving, of course. He had pointed out the advantages of being with a respectable firm and hinted at those of having a charming and tolerant employer. I replied that I should never work for a firm that was less than respectable, and suggested that charm was cheap and tolerance a matter of opinion. He observed that there was much to be said for a good safe job with a pension, and I remarked that the advertisement columns in the papers were filled by the despairing cries of the occupiers of good safe jobs begging to be let out. He suggested that I was charitably paid by him much more than my labour was worth and would secure in the open market; I retorted that mine

was a salary he would blush to offer to a young man of half my age. He said, oh, if we were getting on to equal pay again there was nothing more to be said, and I said if he ever felt like sending me any conscience money he knew my address. So we parted. But I don't think he would dare to give me a bad reference, considering how many years I have held that firm together; I should know how to make his life uncomfortable for him if he did.

Mr. Callendar was backed with astonishing unanimity by my relations. One and all, from the unmarried nieces to Grand-uncle James, told me roundly that I was a fool; it was not so easy to get another job at my age. It seemed it would have been easier at any age but mine; if I had been ten years younger, my sister Clare said, she could have seen the sense of it; there would have been a chance of bettering myself. Uncle Simon, who had inherited Aunt Annie's house, told me to wait till I was older and had a better idea what to do with money; I told him that my ideas on that subject were as good as anybody's. But what one wants, what one will die for at my age, is not security and certainly not the mirage happiness, but something to remember. That was what Aunt Annie had understood, and I felt that with that I could face even forty years in a house on the promenade. Besides, if I had been Aunt Annie I should have made that house into a boarding house; it would have been a gold mine in a place like that.

But by the time she was alone in it, of course, she was too exhausted; there wasn't a spark of initiative left in her—or only the initiative to make a will. That will had been a real revelation. Her death had been a nine days' wonder in our household and had provoked many undramatic memories which had amplified my puny recollection of that solitary visit. She had been shy and inarticulate all her life, and in her latter years, I gathered,

thoroughly surly. But they were all astonished, and so was I, at the things she had thought mattered in the end. Besides the house and the legacy to the nieces she had left a bequest for the supply of flowers to the altar of St. Oswald's, a small one to the old servant who had lived with her and who was five years older than she had been, and a large one for the upkeep of her own and her parents' graves. "As if we shouldn't have taken care of that," said my mother, and again I felt ashamed of myself. For forty years Aunt Annie had lived in that big Victorian house, sitting at the window which looked over the sea, feeling herself and the dead united in a bond of isolation from the living who walked along the promenade, feeling the indifference of the world beyond the windows and coolly, with what seemed to me a heroic cynicism, offering to buy its tardy recognition.

I peeped into the second hangar on the opposite side of the airfield from the control tower. The doors at either end were open and a gale like a slipstream blew through it. The floor here was whitened by guano in a wide stripe from wall to wall beneath each narrow girder, and a solitary starling fluttered out while I stood in the entrance; it seemed to have a broken wing, which was the reason, I supposed, why it had not gone foraging with the flock. The presence of another living creature in that vast shell made it seem less macabre. In one corner an almost bald broom leaned against the wall and a paint tin stood beside it. I wondered whether Aunt Annie's will had been as much of a revelation to my mother, who was her sister, as it had been to me; it was sad to think that the one revealing document most of us ever write never reaches its public until we are beyond the reach of its applause or sympathy. There were other things she had written which had touched me deeply, perhaps because I was of an age to be feeling the shadow

of the same anxieties and consolations. She had left some money to provide radios for the old people in the nearby almshouses, and some for the local cats' home. Her old companion, who had been spending Christmas with her daughter when my aunt died, told me once how once a week she and Annie had cooked two pounds of cod and walked round the town with it in a basket. There were certain cats who were always waiting for them at points which had been selected by chance and ratified by repetition; the cats were always there on Fridays, wherever they might spend the intervening week, and they ran to meet them like lovers. And yet Aunt Annie never kept a cat herself; she said they gave her asthma. The family doctor had suggested it as a possible cause of the complaint to her parents in her childhood, and cats had been banished from the house; Aunt Annie never put the matter to the test again when she finally overcame her weakness.

By the time I had made the journey to the shore and back again I was worn out and famished. Even after a meal I felt disinclined to explore any further, and I sat gazing at the sea and feeling the fresh salt air expel from my lungs and pores the murk of London. I felt my backbone stiffening as I sat there, tired as I was. Or perhaps it was the effect of the port I had brought with me to sustain my solitude.

Presently it began to get cold, but I did not like the idea of sleeping inside the tower and I was too weary to look around for wood to make a fire to sit by, so I unpacked my sleeping bag and crawled into it. It was still far from dark; I had forgotten how long was the northern daylight, and it was midnight before the hill to the south-west lost its twilight olive green and became heather-coloured against the apricot tints of the sky. The sea was calm and scarcely audible; sometimes the dying wind

revived itself and wandered across my face to rustle the grasses on the bank behind me. In a gorse bush a few feet away a bird I did not know and did not want to squeaked with distressing regularity like the wheel of a perambulator in need of oil.

My long journey, the satisfaction of a long-felt craving, and the solitude of the place had induced a mood of lush melancholy which centred around Aunt Annie; I could not get her out of my thoughts, and the maudlin tears ran down my cheeks whenever I thought of the grateful cats. I argued that there was no reason for it; nothing in Aunt Annie's life became her like the leaving of it. She had never given the slightest hint that she would have appreciated my friendship or my occasional company. And yet Aunt Annie had fair to have at least as good a wake as Rose Aylmer, when the silence was broken, or rather slowly penetrated by an increasing hum.

It pierced insistently through my numbing senses, and suddenly I was awake and concentrating on it. At first I was astonished at the idea that there were other human beings on earth, so deeply was I permeated by the idea of solitude. Then I remembered that nowadays nowhere is inaccessible, and I cursed the fool who thought of flying at such an hour. Then again I realised that I might be under a transatlantic air-route, and I was sufficiently interested to prop myself up on one elbow and stare at the plane which hung like a wasp in the sunset. Either it was much farther away than it sounded and the noise of the engine magnified by the stillness or reflected by the sea, or it was much too small for a transatlantic plane.

And it had no lights. In the quiet and the twilight it was difficult to judge distances, but after a few minutes it became clear that the plane was heading for Harbister. It climbed to avoid the hill, but only just cleared it, as if it knew the height to a centimetre, and circled round

above the airfield. My brain told me that it was very odd that an unilluminated aircraft should have sought out a deserted airfield on an almost uninhabited island, but it could not persuade my drowsy senses that there was anything the matter. These were prepared to exert themselves only in a matter of life and death, and when the plane had landed safely I sank back again on my pillow. There did not seem to be anything out of place in its quiet and knowledgeable progress along the runway, and as soon as the sounds of its engine had died away I was on the verge of sleep, the image of Aunt Annie effectively exorcised. I, an interloper, could hardly quarrel with what went on at midnight in an island to which I had only come, perhaps, by courtesy of a dream.

I was conscious long enough to watch it taxi along the runway towards the most distant hangar and disappear into it; then I turned my back on the sunset and slept, resolving to investigate in the morning.

I had cooked my breakfast and set a kettle of water on the fire to wash in before I remembered the aircraft the next morning, and when I thought of it I was more than half convinced that I had dreamed of its arrival. The place seemed so wild and ruinous in a decadent way that I could more easily believe in its being haunted than being tenanted. I started out presently for the hangar. Beside the runway down which the plane had moved I looked for tracks where the wheel might have touched the grass, for it had been almost dark when it had landed; but there was not so much as a broken blade of grass or a drop of oil.

The runway was nearly a quarter of a mile long, and by the time I was halfway across it my search for some sign of the midnight visitor had taken on a sort of desperation. Last night when I had decided to leave investigation to the morning it had never occurred to me that when the morning came there might be nothing to investigate. It had never passed across my mind that my senses might be playing tricks on me. This morning it began to seem more, and more probable that this was what had happened; I was haunted or psychic or something and what I had seen was the repetition of an old story; what was more likely than that an airfield should be haunted by one of the many planes which had made their last and fatal landing there? But nothing like this had ever happened to me before; I had never before experienced any intrusion of the supernatural world.

Unpleasant recollections of fearsome hints of the mental symptoms of women approaching their climacteric disturbed me far more than the thought of ghosts. I was thirty-six and acutely aware of it. I had always been quite sure that nothing like that would ever happen to me, but isolation plays strange tricks with the nerves. My careful scrutiny of the verges of the runway yielded nothing, and by the time I had reached the hangar it would have been a relief to have seen the plane there even if it had been loaded with gunmen.

My worst fears were justified when I found the hangar empty. There was no point in searching it; standing in the doorway, I could see every cranny, and there was nothing behind which an aircraft or even a pushbike could have been hidden. I walked back along the other side of the runway still watching for evidence and finding nothing. But I had never felt better in my life, and I could not believe that it had been hallucination; a dream, perhaps, and at last I accepted this suggestion, put the matter out of my mind and started to make myself comfortable.

I cleaned out one room in the tower in case of bad weather, and settled my stores in it, then I went down to the sea for a swim. The water was cold and buoyant, green and clear as bottle-glass; swimming with my eyes turned to the deeps beneath me, I saw black shadows of seaweed masses on the rocks below, looming beneath me like heavy storm clouds on a sky already overcast. Then I floated on my back and gazed ~~up~~ into a sky of milky blue fringed with clouds which rippled like the sand when the tide is out. It was very stimulating, but too cold to bask, and I soon turned towards the shore. As I scanned the shingle for my pile of clothes I saw a figure seated on the stones, a youngish man who sat clasping his knees and tossing his head back at every gust of wind to prevent

the smoke of his cigarette being blown into his eyes. He was sitting right beside my heap of clothing.

I don't think the effect of solitude is cumulative; fifteen years' solitary confinement is only worse than one because the imagination boggles at it. The effect of even twenty-four hours in a desert is dehumanizing. I felt at seeing another human being a panic as great as if I had actually done as I had at first intended and entered the water naked; I wanted to turn back into the sea and swim round to the other side of the island; I had forgotten how to greet a man. But perhaps he was the occupant of Ham Farm, in which case I ought to get to know him. I landed and went up to my clothes, dripping and shivering.

"Thank God I have a cautious disposition," I said, wrapping myself in a towel. "I was strongly tempted to go in in my birthday suit." I don't know why I took it for granted at once that he was not a native; he looked no different from the islanders I had met, who indeed looked no different from any other inhabitants of the British Isles.

"I never thought of that," he said. "I suppose you would have been embarrassed."

"I should probably have died of exposure, one way or another."

He continued to stare at the sea as if he had been sitting on a beach so crowded that he could not have avoided sitting down by someone's clothes and had no wish to take advantage of the situation. Perhaps he relied upon his profile, which was classic. His was one of those wistful, childlike faces which seem to impose on all those who meet them the responsibility for their happiness, though a multiplicity of lines denied its youthfulness. I a little resented the imposition, but I couldn't resist it; I had to ask him what he was doing there.

"I'm staying at Ham Farm," he said.

"Why?"

Frowning at the sea, he said that he was painting seabirds and appropriate backgrounds. He did it for a living; the Americans bought his paintings at a hundred dollars apiece. They would not have minded whether his birds were pheasants or golden eagles, but he had a conscience about it and he painted the rarest birds he could find in their native haunts. There were hen-harriers nesting on the hill towards Harbister, and he had built a hide near their nest and was making his way home from there for a meal. I said I would like to photograph them and he said he would show me the nest. He asked no questions about me, but when I got up to return to the airfield he got up too and came along beside me.

"How long have you been here?" I asked.

"A week."

I was not surprised then that he had sat down by my clothes; after a week here I thought I might probably be glad of a human contact myself, and my resentment at the intrusion on my solitude decreased. I volunteered the information that I had come yesterday, at which he nodded.

"I know. I saw your boat."

"Have you got an aircraft?" I asked.

"Do I look as if I had an aircraft? I only sell three or four pictures a year."

I resisted the temptation to tell him why I asked, for I began to feel the effect of his laconic presence. His method of extracting information was simply to keep dumb until his silence became oppressive and then to listen to what his companion had to say. Most people when hard-pressed for conversation will talk about themselves, and I found myself racking my brains for

snippets of ideas or gobbets of travel-talk which would prove me an interesting companion and one worth his exerting himself to captivate. For his rare smile and his quick observant eye proved that he could do so if he chose. When I caught myself out in this I scolded myself roundly and shut up like a clam, and we progressed towards the airfield in a silence which I tried to make inconspicuous by gazing brightly around me and seeming deeply preoccupied by the lie of the land. But I forgot this in the chill which came over me when we came up to the hangar where the aircraft, whether dream or real, had disappeared. We were approaching it now from the opposite side to the control tower; there was a dip in the ground on this side, a hollow half filled with old oil drums, barbed wire and scrap iron, the remnants of old prangs; but certainly there was no room for a live aircraft. I examined the ground at the hangar entrance for marks of tyres, but it was hard-baked after a week of drought and there was nothing to be seen.

"What are you looking for?" he asked.

"Nothing," I said, and added: "My name is Theresa Barr."

"Are you a Catholic?"

"No."

"Or Irish?"

"No."

"Then why are you called Theresa?"

"I suppose my parents wanted to put people off the scent. What am I to call you?" I asked, as he gave no sign of volunteering the information.

"Charles Pomfret."

"Spelt Pontefract?"

"No—P-o-m-f-r-e-t."

We were halfway across the hangar, and I stopped suddenly; I had almost trodden on a dead bird. It was

my broken-winged starling of the day before, and it was squashed as flat as the pattern on the wallpaper, run over, plainly, by the wheel of the visiting aircraft. I almost fell on my knees beside it in excitement and relief.

"So it was here after all!" I cried.

"What was here?"

"The aircraft—last night. One landed at midnight and taxied into this hangar, but when I came to look for it this morning there was nothing here. I thought I must have dreamed it."

"This bird may have been here some time," he said, looking down at it.

"It was alive yesterday; I saw it."

"How could you possibly know it was the same one? Whole flocks of them come here to roost every night."

"It had a broken wing," I said, and now I actually did kneel down beside it and extend the wing, which was uncrushed, as far as it would go; it had been broken some time before and had set in a deformed position; that starling could never have flown properly since. I had no doubt that it was the one I had seen yesterday.

When I stood up Charles Pomfret bent down and began gingerly to peel the little flattened body off the floor. I watched for a moment without thinking what he was doing, relishing the enormous relief I felt that my senses were proved reliable. Then I came to, to see him down on one knee prizing up the corpse with a penknife.

"Whatever are you doing?" I asked.

My voice must have sounded sharp with something more than curiosity, for he looked up at me and then stood up, wiping his hands on his trousers like a garage hand.

"I thought I'd take it away."

"What for? It'd be no use for anatomy—it's completely crushed."

"I don't know," he said absently, and closed his penknife. Then he walked suddenly back to the doorway by which we had entered and stood looking from one side to the other, moving his whole head with his eyes like a slow-motion film of a spectator at Wimbledon. I joined him after a moment and we stood staring out like a couple of castaways who see the smoke of a passing ship vanish on the horizon. His preoccupation made me feel that perhaps my relief had been premature and that he had some inkling of the purpose of that flying visit.

"Nobody at the farm saw or heard it," he said.

"It came from the west, over the hill.

"Lots of other people must know of this airfield," I added, turning beside him as he turned and set off through the hangar. "The islanders have always been air-minded ever since planes began. Most likely someone had engine-trouble and landed to put it right, and then took off again."

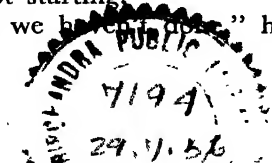
"You didn't see it take off?" he asked.

"No. I fell asleep just after I'd seen it go into the hangar."

We poked about the hangar a little longer without finding anything, though I for one had no idea what we were expecting to find. I made up my mind since he hadn't contradicted it that my suggestion was probably right, but Charles Pomfret didn't seem to like that conclusion. "Maybe I have a pernicky mind," he said, "but I feel that somebody who started flying over the sea at midnight would take the trouble to check his engine first."

"Perhaps he was finishing, not starting."

"Perhaps. There's one thing we haven't done," he



added, ignoring my growing restiveness. "We haven't looked in that rubbish dump outside the door."

"What are we expecting to find? It wouldn't hold anything bigger than a pram."

"Look for any kind of a disturbance, anything that looks like a cache."

He went off to investigate a couple of old oil drums in a corner, and I went out to look at the pit. There was no newly-dug grave or buried treasure there, and though there were plenty of pieces of fuselage, there was nothing that looked as if it could have been flying since the flood. But rubbish dumps have a fatal fascination for me; I have all the instincts of an archaeologist, and I spent several minutes collecting the scattered pieces of the inevitable willow-pattern cup and breaking in the lids of battered tins which proved to be half full of rusty water before I remembered my age.

"There's nothing there," I told Pomfret as I passed him in the hangar. I thought this would be a good opportunity of shaking him off, as he seemed to have found some enthralling object behind the oil drums. But he left them without a protest and came with me. We passed close to where I had found the starling, and automatically I sidestopped to avoid it; there is, I believe, some sort of a physiological memory which does that without any reference to the conscious mind. It was my own action which brought the starling back to memory, and as it did so I saw that it had not been necessary, for the dead bird was no longer there.

Mr. Pomfret did not seem to notice my hesitation, and I did not comment on it, for I was quite sure that it must have been he who had moved the bird. No one but ourselves had been near the hangar, and a rat would hardly have let it lie there all night and carted it away in broad daylight. And he had started to scoop it up

when we had first seen it. I thought his interests were rather ghoulish, but they were no concern of mine; no doubt he had some professional enquiry on the construction of the creatures to satisfy. But starlings are reputed to be full of fleas, and I felt even less anxiety for his company than I had done before.

As we walked along the runway Charles Pomfret dilated upon what he called "the picture frame-up". He sold his pictures to a syndicate which offered him the only market he could find, but he did not seem to feel that he owed it much gratitude. "There are several of us at it," he said. "We never see each other and don't know each other's names. We each turn out at least a picture a month, but they never buy them all. They buy some outright and they offer to sell the others on commission. Somehow the ones they buy always get sold, but the others don't ever."

"They will do eventually," I said, "when your name gets known."

"That's what I thought at first, but they're too clever for that. It's not their business to make careers for us. I've never yet seen my name on one of my pictures after I had sold it to them. Once upon a time this syndicate happened on a seller; he was a man called Blake Farrar, and he painted birds. Blake Farrar died ten years ago, but his soul goes marching on."

"You mean they put his name on other people's pictures—on yours?"

"They do. Blake Farrar's output is stupendous."

"But doesn't anybody ever ask to see him?"

"He's a very shy bird—keeps his name out of the telephone directory, never answers letters and lives eleven miles from the nearest railway station. And his pictures mostly go to America. Visiting Americans sometimes call

and try to insist on meeting him. If they get too tiresome the syndicate gives them an address in Argyllshire. Usually they haven't got time to go that far. Once I got curious myself and went to see if it existed; there was a broken-down crofter's cottage there, and it seems Blake Farrar really did live there once for a couple of summers. Conveniently for my bosses, he died in the south of France, and all the neighbours knew was that he'd left the district thirteen years ago. The Americans probably thought he'd pulled a fast one on the syndicate and were pleased as punch to be in the know—that is, if they ever got to Argyllshire."

"What a shocking racket! Why do you let it go on?"

"I like to eat and I like to paint, and that's the only way I can do both. Mind you," he added, "this is in confidence."

I noticed that the confidence was only partial and that he hadn't mentioned the name of his benefactors, and so I felt under no compulsion to offer the story of my own life in exchange. It had certainly no such highlights in it as his had, but I was rattled that he showed so little interest in it. It was only too evident that he accepted my company for lack of anything better, and I wished that he would go away. He showed no signs of doing this, however, but followed me to my encampment, nosed around the outside of the control tower and then inside it, and then came out to where I was making a fire on which to cook my meal.

"All mod. con. too," he said. "That's more than they have at the farm."

"They feed you very well there, I expect," I said, guessing what was in his mind and anxious to discourage it.

"Tolerably. What do you live on here? Grass?"

"I've brought provisions with me for a week."

"I could bring food with me from the farm."

"I suppose they pack you a lunch before you start out for the day," I said, deliberately misunderstanding.

"Plenty of fresh eggs, and a home-cured ham, and milk and cheese."

"And very nice too."

"Why should I pay three guineas a week when we could bivouac here for nothing? You wouldn't mind, would you? I believe you'd be glad of a man about the place after last night—the spook aircraft might not disappear next time. I'll bring plenty to eat."

"You'll have to do your own cooking," I said ungraciously. "There's no service."

"I can do that too. I'll be back before dark; keep the fire up."

"You can make your own fire as well," I said spitefully. I was indignant at the proposed infliction, but I did not know how to prevent it.

"Just as you like," he said, looking at me as if he were noticing me for the first time, with an ironical glint in his pale grey eyes. "Anybody'd think you didn't want my company. All I ask is that you don't poison the well."

He set off in the direction of Ham Farm, leaving me to cook my bacon and egg and consider whether his coming constituted a threat to my virtue. I was past the age when young men either ignored me or made love to me, but not so far past that I had reconciled myself to the unlikeliness of a return to the state of mingled mortification and excitement which accompanied it. Charles Pomfret at once attracted and repelled me; I sensed that he was a predatory animal, but he had the air of one who preyed for a purpose, who felt that in maintaining himself at all costs to other people he was performing a public service. His attitude was so convincing that I felt my curiosity aroused as to what this purpose could be.

He seemed to possess the absolute concentration of a fly on a window-pane; I have seen one walking methodically round the edge of the glass in search of an outlet and crawling unfeelingly over any fellow-victim who happened to be in his way. I began to lose the sense of freedom I had felt on reaching the island, to feel myself a fellow-prisoner behind the glass, differing only from him in that I had not yet fully realised my situation.

Because of this I began to feel that I disliked him, and I contemplated abandoning my claim to the control tower and making off out of sight before he returned. I did not flatter myself that he was likely to pursue me. If I had noticed any other water supply I would have done this, but water was not plentiful on the island. The only other source I knew of was Harbister Loch, which was three miles away on the other side of the hill, a desolate spot and where I would have no sea-bathing, for the access to the sea was limited to rare gullies down the terrific cliffs; these were not easy to negotiate, and the depths of the water at their foot was unfathomable.

So I ate my meal in an uneasy reverie, and presently Pomfret returned with a large knapsack on his back and a basket in his hand. He had been as good as his word and brought everything he needed, and we set up independent establishments some twelve yards away from each other. I went down to the sea for another swim, and when I came back he was throwing driftwood on to my dwindling fire.

“Heaping coals of fire, aren’t you?” I asked, but I was grateful for the warmth, for the sun was sinking. He came and sat beside the fire and watched my movements. There was nothing spontaneous about him, and I felt that the interest was calculated, though I could not see quite what he was studying. But he was observing me with a naturalist’s eye, and my most automatic

movements conveyed to him an information I knew nothing of.

"What brought you here?" he asked at last. "Are you on holiday?"

I told him about Aunt Annie, and about my former visit to the island. He listened without comment, and when I could think of nothing further to add and fell silent, he got up and said that he was going to bed. I did the same, and fell asleep almost immediately.

Spending the night out of doors seems to restore some primitive talent for sleeping with one ear open, and for distinguishing unfamiliar sounds from the safe and constant background of wind and sea. It must have been only a very slight noise which woke me, but probably it was a metallic sound, the click of a cycle lamp or the tinkle of a metal tool against it. I looked over to Charles Pomfret's encampment and saw his head emerging from the sleeping-bag, vignetted against the dark by a circle of light from a bicycle lamp set on the ground beside him. He was propped on his elbows intently examining something that lay on the ground in the lamplight. I saw a pair of thin little matchstalk legs sticking up from it, and knew that he was studying the dead starling.

"What have you got there?" I asked. He made no answer and did not seem to hear me, so I got up stubbornly and went closer to see for myself. In his hand was a neat slender scalpel; the nasty little corpse had been pulled apart and on a piece of paper before him was what looked like a round stone the size of a hawthorn berry. He did not seem to object to my presence, though the sight of his activities made me suddenly frightened, remembering his secretiveness over picking up the bird. He lifted the stone and held it closer to the lamplight for my inspection; apparently he had found the object of his curiosity and was well satisfied.

"A bezoar stone," he said.

"And what might that be, in words of one syllable?"

"A stone formed in an animal's body, like a gall-stone in a man."

"Or a pearl in an oyster?"

"Exactly like a pearl," he agreed, and added: "The bezoars of swallows are said to be especially valuable, but I could never bring myself to dissect a swallow."

"Valuable for what?"

"They are supposed to have all sorts of medicinal properties, and of course to be very lucky; they are said to be antidotes to any kind of poison."

"A very useful thing to have about you," I said.

"Or to avert the evil eye."

"Quite indispensable, I'm sure, in some society."

"In Ceylon they grind them into powder and swallow them, to bring them luck and good health."

"I never suspected you of being superstitious," I said, and he put the stone carefully down and looked up at me with a shrewd smile.

"You've suspected me of most other things since we met, haven't you?" he asked. "I suppose there is no reason why you shouldn't—I did rather force myself upon you. But the fact is I couldn't have stayed any longer at the farm—I've spent all the cash I had left on the food I brought here tonight. And I have special reasons for not wanting to go away just yet."

"You couldn't bring yourself to tell me what they are, having told me so much?"

"Oh, I haven't nearly finished my sketches—and I only found the hen-harrier two days ago."

I knew he was evading my question, but he was the only man I had ever met who was as poor as I was—indeed, he seemed to be a good deal poorer at that moment—and my heart went out to him. It came back

a moment later when he tried to borrow from me the money for his return down south. I pointed out that my legacy was very small, that I depended on it to keep me until I found another job, and finally that I did not carry it about with me. He treated all these explanations with an impatient disbelief and evidently regarded them as excuses; he succeeded in a very few words in making me feel a mean old harridan, but I was not to be persuaded.

"Why didn't you get a return ticket?" I asked. "I did. The fare up here is so terrific I should never have risked not having enough to get me back." The moment I mentioned my return ticket I felt my hair begin to stand on end at the thought of what this revelation might lead to; I wanted to chatter on hastily in order to distract him from my enviable possession, but I couldn't think of another word to say. My silence seemed horribly obvious to me, and I knew that it emphasised my remark. But he was busy pounding up the bezoar on a flat stone and gave no sign of noticing it.

"It's important to remove the core," he remarked, "because that very often *is* a poison—it provokes the antidotal secretion, I suppose. I can't find anything in this one. Damn this rotten light."

"Leave it till morning," I suggested.

"I can't do that, once I've broken it up; it'd lose its virtue."

"But you're not really going to swallow it?"

"Certainly I am; I can't afford to leave any stone unturned."

"I doubt," I said, "if the stone will leave you unturned. It makes me sick to think of it."

"Why?" he asked. "It's no worse than a lot of these hormonal extracts you swallow so cheerfully just because they come out of a dark bottle. In fact, it's probably very much the same thing."

"Suppose you can't find the core?"

"Then I shall risk it; it's probably dissolved."

"It might be something microscopic."

"It would have to be a certain size in order to get lodged; it's usually a seed or something similar."

"You're mad," I said, and went back to my bed. He pounded away at the stone a little longer, scrutinized it carefully again, then tipped the powder into a cup of water which stood at his side and stirred it. He looked over to my sleeping-bag and lifted the cup.

"Santé," he said, and drank it off. He sat for a few minutes holding the cup in his hand and looking very thoughtful, then he wriggled back into his sleeping-bag and appeared to fall asleep.

I slept at last, and woke wondering what was the reason for the active anticipation which at once took possession of my thoughts. Charles had thoughtlessly built a fire whose smoke was billowing majestically over me, though well above my head. For a few moments I lay gazing at the black cloud, and it was some time before it dawned upon me that it was quite the wrong shade of cloud to match a sky of such a promising blue. I remembered my companion and his macabre actions of the night before, and I raised myself on my elbow to see if he had survived them. He seemed to have been up for some time, for there was a great pile of broken wood midway between us.

"How do you feel?" I asked. "Any healthier or luckier?"

"Magnificent, thank you; I recommend the recipe." He pointed to the wood pile. "I collected that in five minutes on the beach and carried it up. I feel as strong as Hercules."

"If that's my bacon you're cooking, I think you'll find it's smoked already; it only needs frying now."

"That is cheap sarcasm," said Charles, "and unworthy of you. I am frying two of the eggs I bought from the farm, preparatory to offering you one, with a slice of ham."

"Flavoured with powdered amber I suppose, or pulverised fish-bone."

"With nothing more ambitious than salt and mustard, which you can dispense with if you prefer."

Despite myself, I was impressed to find myself in the presence of a man who brought mustard with him to a desert island. It was a brilliant morning. A row of gulls sat along the parapet of the control tower looking like gargoyles on the spire of some Gothic minster. Now and again one would take off, launching itself on to the air as a swimmer launches himself into the sea. Their vulture-like heads seemed ill suited to the silky whiteness of their plumage.

"It is odd," said Charles Pomfret, "but this morning everything seems to have a heightened significance for me, a meaning of tremendous importance which somehow just escapes me. But I shall find it soon, probably before the day is out. For instance, there must have been some destiny behind my meeting you in this outlandish spot; we are obviously meant to achieve the Holy Grail together. I expect you feel the same?"

I was certainly conscious of an excitement which had been missing from my awakening yesterday, when I had expected nothing more than a rest and some good photographs from my holiday, but Tennyson had not been in my mind at that moment, nor had I had any sense of impending fate, unless it was a twinge of anxiety for the fate of my return ticket.

"It must be the effect of the bezoar," I said. "I feel nothing like that."

"I was afraid you might not. It may be the bezoar; wonderful effects are imputed to it. They say, don't they, that many drugs give you this deceptive feeling of brilliance and power—I must be careful not to become an addict. It would be dreadful to become an addict of the stones of starlings. Imagine the things it might lead to—one might be reduced to crawling along the cornice of St. Martin-in-the-Fields a dizzy height above Trafalgar Square to trap them."

"Or roosting at night in the trees of Finsbury Circus."

"Ah," said Charles, "milieu—a city office. I thought so, but it might have been a provincial newspaper or even a minor academic post, though I hoped not. Obviously independent. But if you say fate did not send you here to be my helpmate, why did you come here? To escape? To find your soul?"

"To have a rest," I said.

"You made a wilderness, and called it peace. Will you pass the plates?"

"Careful," I said in alarm as he flipped one egg towards me before I had separated the plates; I caught it neatly.

"Don't worry; I can do no wrong."

"You mustn't expect too much of your black magic."

"I suppose not; you never know when it will give out."

The breakfast certainly did him credit. "As a matter of fact," said Charles, somewhat sobered by the discipline of eating, "it probably is only imagination after all. My mind balks so strongly at the immediate prospect that it is absolutely forced to metamorphose it. Come to think of it, there is certainly nothing holy about my impending actions, and you're wise not to allow yourself to get mixed up in them. And I've got a fearful thirst," he added; his spirits seemed suddenly to have sunk as low as they had been high the moment before. I was alarmed.

"If you've poisoned yourself, what will happen to me?" I demanded. "You must really do something about it. I think you ought to write an affidavit declaring that you alone are responsible for anything that may happen to you." I didn't like the bit about his impending actions.

"What arrant egotism. But I will if you'd feel better about it."

He sat down and scribbled for half an hour. I went for a swim, and when I came back he was just finishing writing, and the manuscript seemed pretty bulky. He folded it up and put it in his trouser pocket. Then he jumped up, searched among his stores for a piece of paper, wrapped the starling's body in it and solemnly cremated it. I felt sure from his grave intensity that this was a solemn ceremony and no mere destruction of an offensive object.

"And now let's go to Harbister," he said as the ashes fell apart. Evidently he had had this in his mind for some time; his mind was several jumps ahead of his actions. I had myself intended to go to Harbister that morning, but for some reason I disliked his assumption of it. It was as if a visit to Harbister had become mixed up with the destiny he had felt impending. I felt an unreasonable desire to do almost anything else.

"Bring your camera and we'll see if the hen-harrier is about. The chicks ought to hatch very soon; I want to see them."

There seemed no reasonable objection to be made to this, and we set off along the runway at a smart pace which increased as if we were impelled by some curious horizontal gravity. I calculated that if we kept it up after we had left the runway and taken to the heather we would be at Harbister in three-quarters of an hour—it was a walk which had taken me two in the leisurely week I had spent there. We did keep it up, and soon we were flying over the heather at the speed of a bicycle on a mediocre road, which is no mean pace to keep up over uneven ground and kneedeep in the bristly heather stems. Charles Pomfret did not seem to feel any discomfort from it; occasionally he stopped to take a swig at the water-bottle he had brought with him, and then I stood panting and gasping like a landed fish until he had corked

it up and started off again. At last I protested that I couldn't keep it up, and he slowed down at once with profuse apologies.

"To tell you the truth, I had quite forgotten you," he said. "Are you sure you want to come?"

"To see the hen-harrier?" I asked. "Yes, of course I want to see it."

"I had forgotten the hen-harrier too, for the moment."

"What are these impending actions that are so weighing on your mind?"

"Oh, they are not impending very closely; I've no right to worry you about them."

I did not press my sympathy upon him, for I was relieved to hear that destiny was at some distance, and not, as he had hinted, awaiting us on the doorstep of Harbister House. After that Charles walked at a steady but not abnormal rate, but presently I saw that he was restraining himself with difficulty. He was beginning to fidget, to run his fingers through his hair and fasten and unfasten the buckle of his belt. Beads of sweat collected on his brow, but his face was pale and his eyes prominent. Beads or rather rivulets of sweat were running down my face too, but I knew that I was anything but pale; my skin literally steamed from the hot sun on it and the frantic exertion. And then at last we reached the hide he had built and I collapsed breathless beside it.

It was on the far slope of the hill from the airfield, and below us lay Harbister Loch looking like a pool left on the marshy grass by heavy rain, but there had been no rain for more than a week and the loch never dried up. Its springs must have come from somewhere way below the sea bottom; the miracle of fresh water on a rock surrounded by brine awed and astounded me. I crawled into the hide to shelter from the sun and Charles Pomfret set off towards the loch to refill his water-bottle.

While he was away the hawk, who had been foraging while the sun was on the eggs, returned to her nest and spread herself over them, and I got two or three splendid pictures.

She did not seem to mind my being there. When I saw Charles coming back I crawled out and went to meet him and warn him that she was there, and then I left him to paint and went off to taste the relief of walking at my own pace for a change. It was a very slow one; my thighs were stiff and tired and my legs were torn by the heather stalks.

The loch lay at the bottom of a shallow basin with a radius of about two hundred yards, but towards the cliffs the sides of the valley fell away into a sort of lip which protruded towards the sea and considerably prolonged it. I walked round the edge of the tarn collecting specimens of plants that grew in shallow water. My mind was half on what I was doing and half on Charles Pomfret; I would have given a lot for a glimpse of the bulky letter he had put in his pocket. I wondered whether he was contemplating suicide, or had knowingly taken poison last night and was now waiting with inhuman self-control for it to work. I began to regret my refusal to lend him money and to fear that he was desperate, and I had almost made up my mind to offer him my return ticket when I noticed curious marks in the ground near the edge of the loch opposite the lip in the hills, which drove such quixotic ideas immediately out of my mind. For several feet from the water's edge the ground was soft and spongy, and here, appearing abruptly within a yard of it, were the marks of wheels, two wide wheels which had sunk several inches into the soft earth but had force enough behind them to be unchecked; they had made an imprint which would never have taken in the stony ground a few feet further away.

The marks were not more than a few days old, for the crushed blades of grass in the tracks were still green. They pointed towards the gap in the walls of the shadow valley, and I went in that direction. An aircraft landed very skilfully so that it just cleared the lake and had the longest sweep of the valley in which to come to rest could have made those marks; indeed, there was nothing else which could have left them, for the boatman had said that Harbister House had been empty for a year, and no vehicle was likely to have come from there.

To me the aircraft, since I had been assured that it existed, was a curious phenomenon, but no longer mysterious. I did not doubt that there was some mundane explanation behind its visit, and I certainly never thought that its pilot might be unfriendly or even dangerous. I hadn't really thought of the necessity for a pilot; I thought of the aircraft as some rare and exciting bird, and I was amused afterwards to realise that I had gone about its pursuit in the same way as I followed an unsuspecting bird. I went forward quite openly until I came within a hundred yards of the top of the basin; then I trod silently and went very cautiously up the slope and peered over. On the other side of the lip was an expanse of short downland grass perhaps twenty yards square, and on it, facing the sea, was the visitor who had broken my first night's rest on the island. A few yards in front of its nose terra firma came to a sudden end; when I stepped in front of it I looked down an almost perpendicular cliff face to a platform of rock far below over which each incoming wave spread out fanwise and then poured back in a glittering fringe into the hollow of the swell.

It was then, while admiring the skill and nerve necessary for such a landing, that I first thought of the pilot and realised that there might be something unusual

about him. No man was likely to risk his life in that position for the sake of enjoying the view. I had intended to look around for him, to express my admiration and satisfy my curiosity by a few casual questions, but the sight of that cliff-edge brought home to me quite convincingly the idea that he might not take kindly to inquisitive strangers. I took a good look at the aircraft, which was a worn but serviceable training model, and then turned back to tell Charles Pomfret what I had found.

I met him coming up the hill towards me with loping wolf-like strides by which he seemed to move at twice the pace he had walked at yesterday. He looked cooler, but in no way relaxed, and his now prominent eyes had a fixed rapt look which made me wonder if the pill he had swallowed had been a drug after all and the startling story just made up to fob me off when I had inconveniently awakened. But he had all his wits about him, and they moved as fast as a flea; as soon as he saw my face he knew I had discovered something, and he knew at once what it was. It was plain that his thoughts had taken quite another tack from mine, and that whatever he had wanted to watch at Harbister, it had not been the birds.

"You've found the kite?" he asked.

"Yes—right at the edge of the cliff. I saw the marks of the wheels at the water-line of the lake."

"Anybody in it? No, of course not," he answered himself before I could speak. "You wouldn't be here if there had been."

I didn't ask him to explain the comment; I was beginning to think he was off his rocker, and I followed him up the hill again more out of anxiety that he might be in danger so near the cliff edge than because I thought he knew anything about the plane. He peered into it and rummaged for a while in the various pockets, producing

a log-book and a pair of woollen gloves which he looked at grimly for a moment, and then replaced. Then he pulled off the brake, slammed the door of the aircraft, and, walking round behind its tail, began to push it deliberately towards the sea.

"Why are you doing that?" I asked. "You might get a lift down south in it." I was really afraid that he might turn savage if I tried to stop him. He took no notice of my protest, but put his weight against the tail, and the aircraft began to move, and trundled across the short turf as easily as a wheelbarrow. It balanced for a moment at the cliff edge, and Charles Pomfret gave it a sudden thrust and stepped back. One wing went slowly up like the sail of a windmill and the tailplane soared into the air after it before it vanished. After what seemed several minutes we heard a splintering crash and then a dull explosion. Pomfret went to the edge and peered over.

"One ghost successfully laid," he said with satisfaction. "Pity there was no one in it." He turned round and stared at me. "You look as green as a gooseberry," he commented. "You mustn't mind me—I know what I'm doing. My strength is as the strength of ten because my heart is pure."

I said: "I certainly hope you've hit on the right reason," and then I turned back over the hill and sat down on the grassy slope overlooking the loch and shivered. There was something about such a wanton and simple piece of destruction that made it seem like murder, and something about his face which made me think it was only accident that it wasn't. But when he came and sat down beside me I knew he was shaken too, and yet exultant, like a child who has done something it knows to be unforgivable. His hands shook so that he could not get a match out of the box to light his cigarette,

and he had to lay it down again and get a grip of himself before he managed it.

"And now for Harbister," he said.

I groaned; I really did not know how I was going to find my legs again and get back to the airfield, much less trek the extra mile to Harbister House. "Please, not today," I said.

"It must be today. I might not be able to make it tomorrow."

"All the more reason for going home, if you're feeling as bad as that."

"Home!" he said. "Where's home? Not that little stucco box!"

"You know what I mean," I said irritably. And indeed the little stucco box and the long bare runways of the airfield did seem like home to me just then. There was something stifling about the pure clean air of Harbister Hill.

Presently he got up and set off towards the house, and of course I went after him. I didn't want to leave him alone, sick as I was sure he was, but I wanted still less to be left alone myself. He went along at a spanking pace, and I had great difficulty in keeping up with him; as we drew near Harbister House his speed increased and I gave up the attempt. I think he wanted to outdistance me in case he met some unpleasantness there, and perhaps I was not very reluctant to be left behind. Whether it was the will that failed or the body, it became so much more difficult to maintain the pace that I gave up all effort to do so, and dragged my weary limbs up to the open gate some ten minutes after he had entered it. A pane in the window to the left of the door had been shattered and he had disappeared.

THE sight of that broken pane outraged my sense of decency for the second time that afternoon. Harbister House was associated in my memories with orderly efficiency; I couldn't believe there was anything about it which justified Pomfret's questionable methods. It was neither elegant nor antique, a solid stone-built nineteenth-century house which gave no evidence of having been left in a hurry, except that a pair of ragged curtains still hung in one of the big mullioned windows, but these had probably been left to the moths who seemed to have taken them over. It had a garden surrounded by a low stone wall with ridge-tiles on top of it, and a tiled path leading from the gate to the door. It was the kind of house you find in unfashionable seaside resorts, especially in Scotland—three stories high, bleak as a Presbyterian manse, on which they would seem to have been modelled. The kind of house whose upper windows are brightened in August by bathing costumes and gay beach towels hung out to dry. A few tattered rambler roses bloomed forlornly among the knee-high grass round what had been a trim little lawn when I had first seen it.

Charles Pomfret opened the door; his cheeks were scarlet and his eyes were sparkling feverishly. "Come in," he said. "Come in and sit down." I shan't keep you a moment—shan't keep anybody, not ever again. It's all I can do to keep myself. I'm afraid we're unlucky—there's no one at home."

"Did you expect there would be?" I asked. "The house has been empty for over a year."

"Don't talk nonsense," he said sharply. "Who put you up to that? Somebody's been telling you the line to give me."

"The boatman told me, if that's what you mean."

He looked at me suspiciously, then opened the door wider to admit me, but it was my turn to look askance, and I remained rooted to the doorstep. He looked over my head with vacant eyes and muttered: "He must be somewhere on the island."

"Why didn't you knock at the door and go in in the usual way if you thought the house was occupied? You're being very careless with his property. Who is he anyhow?"

"A very old friend of mine—you might almost call him my double. He has been mistaken for me, by someone who should have known better. Not that he's like me at all, but he follows me like a shadow. Ah, but if you walk away from the sun your shadow goes before you—he forgot that. That's why I came north, as far from the sun as could be. And he came before me."

I was tired, bewildered, and getting angry. The afternoon was still hot and the sun glaring, but the sky had been bleached, as if by the heat, of its mediterranean blue and was covered as if by a mould by a throbbing whiteness. The sultriness added to my exhaustion, so that I forgot to be afraid of him.

"If you'd condescend to tell me what you're playing at," I said, making no move to cross the threshold, "I'd stay, because I don't believe you're in a fit state to look after yourself. But if you won't I'm starting right back for the control tower, and you or I are vacating it tonight. I came here for a holiday, not to be hauled around as an accessory to your half-baked pranks. If

you're going to smash up this property as you did the aircraft you can do it alone, because I don't see the fun of that sort of thing, and I very much doubt if your friend would either. If you've got a crumb of sense left in your airy and commodious skull you'll come back with me and go to bed with a hot drink and sleep off the effects of whatever it is you've taken."

"I showed you the harrier's nest," he said with an injured air, which only thinly covered his peculiar exhilaration.

"You don't know a hawk from a handsaw."

"Come in and I'll show you another." His nostrils wrinkled like some fierce little rodent's. He opened the door wider and made a gesture to the empty hall behind him. "Here it is—the nest of the biggest bird of prey still extant. But we've clipped its wings this afternoon between us."

"You mean that aeroplane belonged to the man who lived here?" I asked, beginning to see a glimmering of sense in his rambling. He nodded. I stared past him into the house. The hall was narrow, high and dark, and the stairs ran up steeply into the dimness.

"If he's someone you know and you did it out of spite," I said, lowering my voice, "we'd better get back before we meet him. It could have been an accident, left on the slope like that—the brakes could've slipped or the wind got behind it. Has he heard you?"

"If he has he's been wise enough to get out of the way; but I don't think he's been here. We'll go and look round the garden—or I will. Stay here and sit down if you're tired—there's a rickety deck-chair in the front room."

"Oh no," I said frantically. "Let's lock the door again."

The door was on a Yale latch which he had opened

from inside; he took a last look round the hall, came out and slammed it. "Spite!" he said as he turned away from it. "I suppose that's the usual word for it, or malice—malice aforethought; but I don't feel it's quite fair. I don't feel malicious towards him; I don't think I really consider him on a human plane at all. I just feel he is something which has got to be eliminated."

"And who may you be to set yourself up as judge of that?" I asked. I was more angry than frightened, angry at his infernal self-righteousness. One would have thought he had just come away from a prayer-meeting instead of from pushing an aircraft over the cliff. I have as much feeling for vehicles, from bikes to liners, as I have for many human beings; mobility after all is the essence of freedom, and the thought of that machine which would have opened up the world to its owner ruthlessly and pointlessly destroyed made me see red. But my anger was lost on Charles, who was intent now upon some plan which sounded much more deadly than his recent exploit; his silence and his concentration made me realise that whether or not his judgement was that of a normal man, in his own eyes all his actions were more than justified.

"Tell me what's been going on," I said, thinking it might do him good to have to find bald words for it.

"Later on; there isn't time now."

"Is he somewhere around, then?"

"I don't know where he is," he said impatiently, and began to pace round the little garden like a hyena in its cage at the zoo. I stood watching him, my sense of helplessness growing. I did not know what he was looking for and I had no faith that it was there to be found; watching him was like watching some nocturnal animal brought up into daylight. When he had covered every inch of space in front of the house he began to prospect

the back, and suddenly he disappeared under a hedge of stunted hawthorn. I heard a strange sound between a cry and a curse, and ran forward to find him. He was climbing out of a large hole in the ground which had been almost hidden by long grass; the earth which had been taken out of it had been spread round the roots of the hawthorn trees, and a few dead branches seemed to have been laid over it to supplement the grass.

"I fell into it," he said. "I fell right into it." The jolt seemed to have done something to him; he sat by the edge of the hole and buried his face in his hands and wept. I thought he was exhausted; I tried to persuade him to come back into the house and we would spend the night there, for the sun was getting low. He took no notice; I might not have been there, and I heartily wished I hadn't been, for it was plain my presence did no good. He got up at last and stumbled out of the garden and set off over the hill without ever glancing back to see if I were following, still at his frightful marathon pace. I followed him at my own speed, for I saw I could do nothing, and I thought it would be better for both of us to leave him to himself. When I reached the airfield at last I found him walking round and round in the open hangar looking for the way out. I took his arm and led him as if he had been a blind man along the runway. He was murmuring threats and promises mingled with sudden expressions of tenderness, but I knew well enough that these were not addressed to me. When we came near to the control tower he suddenly let go of my arm and ran to the great bed of nettles which flourished at its foot. He began to pick them in handfuls and rub them on his arms and neck, and then he stripped off his shirt and flung himself down and rolled in them, and at last lay there staring up at the sky as if he were lying on a feather mattress.

I was torn between the necessity for watching him and the desire to run off to Ham Farm for help and shelter; his stillness now was more alarming than his energy earlier. The even scum of cloud which obscured the sky had thickened and a strong gusty wind sprung up; one of the sudden island storms was threatening. I could not leave him in the nettles; I would have to try and drag him into the tower.

First of all I moved our packs in, hoping he might recover in the meantime, and when I had done this and went up to him I saw that he did in fact look much more normal than he had done at any time that afternoon. His face had sharpened its contours and the flesh shrunk in an extraordinary fashion for so short a time—he looked as if he had been ill for weeks—but his eyes were normal and he recognized and spoke to me.

"I've been poisoned, you know," he said, "but not very badly. I think there's going to be a storm."

"How glad I am I didn't cook for you," I said. "You can only blame yourself."

"Who said I'm blaming anybody? I've found out what I wanted to know. Give me your hand, there's a good girl."

In reaching out a hand to him I got badly stung by the nettles, and my flesh came up immediately in large red lumps. But I was astonished to see that there was no trace on Pomfret's body of the contact with the weeds. He was extremely weak and unsteady on his legs, and all traces of the ferocious energy of the afternoon had gone. He got into his sleeping-bag without a protest; we were established in one room which had a chimney, and I lit a fire and opened a tin of soup.

"I can't understand why you didn't get stung," I said. "You must have a hide like an elephant."

"No; I flatter myself it's rather thinner than most—it's nothing to do with skin really. That stuff I took last night had a strong alkali in it, and the acid in the nettles neutralised it."

"Why did you take it, if you knew that?"

"I didn't know for certain till I had; you remember I couldn't find the seed."

"Yes, I remember."

"I found a bit of chaff that might have been the husk of it, but I had to be sure. You see, it's not a plant that ever grows as far north as this."

"Starlings travel." I said, looking out of the unglazed window at the first heavy drops of rain.

"This one didn't; it had a broken wing."

I began to feel dazed and stupid; the afternoon had been altogether too much for me. He had been ill and had acted strangely, and now he was much better and it had all been a nightmare, yet here he was trying to prove that the reality was just as bad. I felt horribly resentful, and by my silence I tried to discourage him from any more disturbing revelations, but once the idea had been voiced it worked in the mind and could not be forgotten.

"You think the seed must have been brought here then?" I asked at last.

"I'm sure of it."

"By someone who knew it was poison?"

"Yes."

"And who lived at Harbister House?"

"And still does."

"And the hole in the garden? I suppose it was a grave?"

"It had been, until he dug her up, when he knew I was coming here."

"You said he was a friend of yours," I said, in a feeble protest against the unlikeliness of it all.

"He was once—and so was she. That was how I knew she had a tame starling that used to eat from her plate; it had a broken wing."

A tremendous gust of wind brought the heart of the storm with it—rain sizzling on the asphalt outside till it silenced our conversation, and then a sudden blizzard of hail. The noise of it on the hangar not far away was deafening. Big stones spattered down the chimney and fizzled as they landed on the fire, or bounced out into the room like ping-pong balls. For a time it was too noisy even to think, and I sat listening to it while my thoughts collected somewhere in the back of my mind, ready to form into arguments as soon as the din abated. Charles lay with his hands clasped under his head listening to the storm with apparent satisfaction; when the wind dropped for a moment he said gratefully: "He'll never be able to get away in this."

My heart sank; I had had a growing and most comfortable feeling that he had been talking about the distant past, which had only a historic interest for us, a feeling which returned persistently whenever I relaxed my attempts to concentrate on the story. The hailstorm ceased suddenly and gave place to a steady but soft-voiced downpour; the leaking gutters of the tower let fall a noisy torrent past the window. I tried desperately to think of some commonsense criticism which would break a hole in the web of argument. I had seen enough of Charles to know that he had probably far stronger reasons for his beliefs than those he had so far told me, and that these would come out in time; it was this thought, and the desire to hasten their expression, that made me raise my objections.

"How do you know," I asked, "that all starlings don't have these stones; and that they aren't all poisonous?"

"That's part of the story," he said slowly, as if won-

dering how much he was going to give away. "I suppose I may as well tell you."

"Please do. I shall only get hold of things all wrong and keep on asking foolish questions if you don't."

"I know about the starlings because we once investigated it thoroughly—I and Colin Carmichael, who lived at Harbister House. We once spent a school vacation together, at the school, because all our parents were abroad. It was winter, and we were snowed up. The school was right down in Devon, on the coast, and such snow was almost unheard of. The birds were in great distress.

"There was a little shrub which grew close to the common-room window which was covered with small fruit long after all the other trees had been stripped; for some reason the birds wouldn't touch it. But things got too much for them in the end, and one day a flock of starlings descended on it and gorged themselves. You can imagine how two small boys gloated; we had noticed that they avoided the berries, and we fully expected them to fall dead on the spot. But they didn't seem to suffer any ill effects, and we were disappointed.

"The next summer we were there again. And in the height of July, when the sun was at its hottest, we noticed that there seemed to be some sort of an infection amongst the starlings. We kept finding dead birds in the garden, and they were always starlings. Colin, who fancied himself a scientist, picked one up and dissected it; it had a stone in it like the one I showed you yesterday. He began to collect all the dead starlings he found and to open them, and he found a similar stone in each of them. He was a methodical chap, so he started to open the stones. There was a seed in each of them, and Colin planted one of the seeds. It grew into a little shrub like the one under the common-room window.

“Small boys are always thorough, and I suppose Colin was always more thorough than most. After he had found out what had killed the starlings he got ready to try it on himself. He was prepared for considerable nervous strain, for there had been no effect on the starlings for about six months after they had eaten the berries. But starlings must be tougher than we are, or we haven't the same power of making pearls; the berries affected him straight away, and he was extremely ill—so ill that they took him to hospital at once and after that he didn't come back to the school, so that I didn't see him again for years. Not that I missed him. Everyone said he was going to die; I've often wished since that he had done. It would have saved me a good deal of unpleasantness now, to say the least of it.”

He talked on through most of the night, and by the morning my dislike for Colin Carmichael was almost as violent as his own.

THE trouble with Colin Carmichael even when he was at school, said Charles, was that he was always so much more clever than anybody else. He soon realised that he could get along quite well and easily keep up with the others by doing very little work, and he did more than he has ever done since. It was a thousand pities, because he had an extremely quick and retentive mind which might have made him distinguished if he had given it a shadow of a chance. He had also a knack of getting what little work he could not avoid done for him which in later life he developed to the pitch of genius.

He and Charles had been guardedly friendly. They were almost the same age, in the same house and the same form, and often left alone together during the school holidays, for Colin's parents were in India and Charles' were often abroad; his father, I gathered, had had something to do with oil. They shared a certain aloofness; with Charles it was a dreamy detachment from reality, while with Colin it was a knowledge of his own peculiar sharpness. Unlike most small boys who are conscious of a difference between themselves and their neighbours, he did not then boisterously exert himself to prove that it did not exist; he accepted and developed it with a smug precocity.

That was his attitude all through life; in the army it went down very well. People tend to take you at your own valuation there, for lack of time to make their own

observations, and word soon got round that Colin was clever, and at the same time very "sound"—that is, he had no cranky notions about politics, sex or religion. He kept them all in their proper place as subjects for after-dinner stories. He was a major in Intelligence when the war ended, while Charles was a tough and efficient N.C.O.

Charles had had a grudging admiration for him at that time; he was so frank and unassuming about his methods. It was all luck, he said—luck and good timing.

"And caution," he added. "Caution most of all, perhaps—the ability to lead an inner life while outwardly remaining a pattern of conventionality. That's a thing you artistic fellows never learn—how to hide your light under a bushel without extinguishing it. It's an art I cultivated very early. I was a past master of it at school."

"You certainly were," agreed Charles. "I never saw any signs of it, and I suppose I knew you as well as anyone did."

"I was always an odd fish."

"You meant to be," said Charles. "You made yourself into one."

"No, it was nature that did that. I made the most of it, perhaps, because I've never believed in swimming against the tide. But it was nature who really bitched it up."

They were standing at the bar of an oriental-style dive behind Regent Street, where they had met accidentally for the first time for many years. Charles had been demobbed some weeks ago, and was engaged in what was becoming an occupation as permanent and as demoralising as beggary, the search for somewhere to live. Colin was still in uniform, but he was wearing it for the last time, for he had entered civvy street that morning.

He had been finding the experience depressing until he met Charles, for he was never good at entertaining himself, and the bare prospect of having to earn a living sometime soon appalled him. He had an allowance from his father, but it was not enough to maintain him in the manner in which he felt he owed it to himself to be maintained. Charles had been giving him an account of his experiences, and he had evidently thought it advisable to produce a little companionable melancholy of his own, hence the self-analysis. It was his habit, if ever anyone attempted to unload their worries on him, to produce troubles of his own, which he was always able to do without lying about his situation by making them psychological, less tangible, certainly, but all the more distressing to a sensitive soul. Not, said Charles, that I think he had no psychological troubles, but he had none that a couple of months of hard manual labour would not have cured, and they were not the kind that he thought he had.

"But this housing problem of yours can be solved quite easily, you know," he said at last, just when Charles had decided that he was as perfect a broken reed as ever grew beside the banks of Acheron. "What we ought to do is to collect up five or six of us, buy up one of those ruinous old cadavers in Maida Vale and split it up between us."

"A lot of people have thought of that one," said Charles. "There isn't even a ghost of an unoccupied building between here and Ponders End."

"I thought of it some time ago," said Carmichael, "and having a little money by me, I raised a loan and bought one. Care to come and look at it?"

On the face of it, this did not sound improbable. Colin had been in London during most of the war, through times when property had been going for a song, and

might easily have put some money in it for a speculation. And Charles was much too desperate to miss a chance.

"Does that mean that you would let me a room?"

"Well, old chap, I couldn't afford to let you live there rent free. It wasn't cheap, and I've got to pay off the debt."

It was all quite on the level, or seemed so. Colin *had* got a house in Maida Vale, or he had the keys and undisputed right of entrance. That was all that Charles noticed at the time; afterwards, he said, he remembered that the furniture and decorations in it when they went round to inspect it were not such as might have been expected from a young man of Colin's temperament. But then they might have been family heirlooms, and the house perhaps bought to contain them.

"I shall have most of these moved to the attics," said Colin, nodding at the chintz-covered chairs and mahogany occasional tables, "and let your fellows bring in their own stuff."

Charles went away in a bewildered rapture, feeling that now he could begin to live. He vacated the shabby but expensive little Bloomsbury hotel which had been parasiting for so long upon his shrinking capital. The rent Colin had mentioned was not low, but it was possible. They would have no difficulty in finding the seven other devils who would share the house with them.

It was after he had moved in that Charles began to rediscover so many things he had forgotten about Colin. For instance, his oriental indifference to the state of his surroundings, for all his latent aestheticism. Charles was always the first to reach the limit of his toleration for ash-filled fireplaces, windows fogged by dirt and unwashed pans, and so it was always he who dealt with them. When he suggested that they might pay a woman

to come and clean it for them, Colin did not think it necessary; the house never got really dirty and they could cope with it themselves, he thought. So Charles, who felt indebted to him and did not like to press the point, paid the woman himself and Colin never noticed either her presence or her services.

They selected three more kindred spirits from the forlorn crowds who haunted the house-agents and wandered from one newsagents' board to the next. They were kindred spirits to Charles, for Colin had none. When Charles' friends heard of his good fortune one after another made furtive application. It was Colin who made the final selection, and he did it well, though Charles at the time had not been able to see his guiding principle. They were all poor and all fanatics in a mild and harmless way, each on the track of his private philosopher's stone. Charles had come to terms with his artistic conscience sufficiently to accept the position of Blake Farrar's understudy, but he kept his best energies for works of unproductive originality. Andrew Flamand and Sam Mahony were students living on government grants, and Dicky Sefton, the youngest and most sanguine, hoped somehow to make a living by playing the violin.

For a long time Charles could not understand why Colin had selected Dicky Sefton. It seemed almost like philanthropy, and this anomaly in his companion's character puzzled him. It became gradually clear why he had plumped for the two students; Andrew was studying medicine, and Colin suffered from a gnawing anxiety about his health. Sam was going in for law, and Colin used to sit with him for hours industriously picking his brain. But there seemed no conceivable way in which he or anybody else could make use of Dicky Sefton. It was plain that the boy would only be able

to pay his way while his army gratuity lasted, and he had no kind of academic training behind him; just a touching faith in his ability to play the violin. None of them were connoisseurs of violin-playing, so Dicky might have been a second Paganini without any of them ever noticing. He was appealing, very young, with wistful wide blue eyes, but Charles found it impossible to believe that Colin had been touched by compassion. It was quite a long time before he got to the bottom of Colin's design on Dicky Sefton.

It was gradual in its maturing. Dicky's gratuity lasted him for some months, and then he made an attempt to get a job. The attempt was successful, but Dicky could not endure it; how he had stuck his life in the army Charles did not know. It had been a short one, for he was only nineteen when he was demobbed. The job was in a music shop whose publications were—in conformity with the public taste, as Charles tried to impress upon him—of a low standard. Dicky told the proprietor so one day when he had been bitterly tried by a long session with a well-known dance-band leader, and when he came home that evening he was out of a job and did not know where his next week's rent was coming from. He told Colin so and asked if he could go on living there on tick for a week or so until his luck changed, as he was sure it would. Colin agreed with very little hesitation.

"If I'd seen my way to it," Charles said, "I'd have warned him on no account to get into debt to Colin. But I wasn't prepared to lend him money myself—I hadn't any, and anyhow I thought he ought to come to terms with life however hard he found it. We none of us were except Colin, and Dicky knew that without asking. 'You just don't know what it means to me,' he kept saying whenever anyone suggested he should try something else.

Of course we all knew quite well what it meant, but it didn't do any good to say so; all that happened then was that he was convinced that we were conspiring against him because we were jealous of his genius, and that Colin was the only one who 'understood'. I lost my temper one day when he gave me that line.

" 'Colin understands all right,' I said angrily, forgetting for a moment how dependent I was on him. 'Colin understands everything he does from the moment he starts it, and that's why, even if I can't see the end of this yet, I know he's up to no good. I never could see why he took you in here in preference to Tom or Baillie Wilkins.'

" 'Colin is a frustrated artist,' he said. 'He has a natural feeling for art, but he's just too congenitally idle to practise it. He's the type who would have been a great patron in the sixteenth century.'

" 'You may be right,' I said resignedly. 'How much do you owe him?'

"He wouldn't admit to owing Colin anything. But from that time on he gradually gave up even his visits to the agents. He spent a lot of time practising in his room, and often Colin sat in there and listened to him when he could think of nothing better to do. But he spent more and more of his time doing odd jobs for Colin. He kept his shoes clean, pressed his clothes and darned his socks, and once I even caught him taking a cup of tea to him in bed in the morning. He was furiously angry at being caught, which made me think he probably did it regularly.

" 'Dicky, you're nothing but a gentleman's gentleman,' I said. 'Where do you think this sort of life is leading you?'

" 'I don't think,' he said coldly. 'It isn't necessary. There are so many of you busy doing it for me.' And

five minutes later I heard him playing his violin to Colin in bed.

"I told the other two, and we began a concerted drive to pull Dicky out of Colin's clutches before it was too late. We lost no opportunity for a bawdy jest, and at last even Dicky began to think that everything might not be so chaste and spiritual in intention as he had imagined it. Colin was furious; I had never seen him angry before, and that made me think he really was enamoured of Dicky, that and the fact that he was certainly losing money over him, which I had never known him do willingly before. One day I heard of a job which I thought would suit Dicky, and I told him about it. He sat down in my chair and put his head in his hands.

"'It's no good,' he said. 'I couldn't do it. He wouldn't let me. Besides, I owe him too much; no matter what I earned, I couldn't pay him for months, and he wouldn't let me hold it over once I had gone against him.'

"'Forget about it, then,' I said. 'Go away where he can't find you, and send him the money when you've got it. He's got no evidence you owe him anything.' For there was never any kind of paper-work between us; the matter of rent was just a gentleman's agreement. 'It takes two gentlemen to make a gentleman's agreement,' I said, seeing that this was how Dicky looked at it, 'and Colin isn't one. You'd better get out.'

"'I couldn't,' he said. 'It'd be on my conscience for the rest of my life. I'd be terrified he'd find me. I'm here for the rest of my life, Charles; I can't ever get away.'

"'Keep your chin up,' I said. 'You might win a football pool.'

"He gave me a pathetic small-boy's smile and went to his room, then got his violin out and began to scrape.

We heard him playing all night until the small hours; he kept us all awake, but only Colin ventured to make a protest. I heard him go along to Dicky's room and raise his voice in argument, but the playing hardly stopped and as soon as the door shut behind him the sweet shrill sound started up again. I don't know whether Dicky could play in public or not, but he certainly touched inspiration that night. Soon after two o'clock in the morning there was the sound of a shot.

"It was the climax to a pitch of misery we had hardly understood, and I think it hardly surprised me. Once you get yourself into a hole like that at Dicky's age it's touch and go, and there were too many ex-army revolvers lying around our house—they made it too easy. Colin was terribly shaken. Sam went out at once for the police and Andrew examined the body, but that was a farce. Dicky had blown his brains out.

" 'Why on earth could he have done it?' Colin asked, and the look of flabbergasted bewilderment on his face disgusted me; for the first time I realised that although he was so quick-witted about everything that affected himself, where other people were concerned he was a moron. He just couldn't believe they had feelings like his own.

"The inquest taught him quite a lot, but it didn't improve his temper."

DICKY's death left a nasty taste in all our mouths. We had very little to say about it, after the first general expressions of horror and discomfort, and for a while we found we had very little to say to each other about anything. We couldn't discuss it without blaming Colin, and I at least felt that I couldn't say anything half as unpleasant as my thoughts were without moving out of his house, which I wasn't prepared to do. We talked little enough to each other, but we virtually sent Colin to Coventry without any such deliberate intention. It just seemed to happen that whenever he came into the room any conversation which was going on there dried up; none of us felt sufficiently sympathetic towards him to make any effort to prolong it. Colin was no fool; he knew what we were thinking just as well as if we had said it, and we saw very little of him for a few weeks. Nobody was very sorry, but we sometimes wondered where he spent his time.

So we went on, the feeling growing between us that the situation was not likely to last, and that Colin would find some excuse for turning us out. Andrew came into my room one day when I returned after a visit to Blake Farrar's managers. He was a square, solid man with a domed forehead where the hair was receding; his brow was heightened considerably by it, and it gave him a look of magisterial wisdom which no doubt would stand him in good stead in a professional career, though he was vain enough to regret it. It was his

vacation, and he spent most of his time in the house studying.

"I say," he said, "a queer old cove came round this afternoon."

"How queer?" I asked.

"He wanted to speak to Mr. Carmichael—said he'd heard he'd come back. I said he'd been away about a week, and was still away as far as I knew. That's right, isn't it? I haven't seen him since the middle of last week—Wednesday or Thursday."

"Neither have I, now you mention it," I said. "But I'm not losing any sleep over it."

"You surprise me. Well, this old fellow seemed to think he'd been away much longer than that—a matter of years. Said he used to be caretaker here twelve years ago, and Mr. Carmichael was living here then. Did you know him twelve years ago?"

"I think that was one of the happy intervals when I'd lost sight of him," I said. It is odd how some people, usually not the ones one would choose, seem to haunt one through life, appearing in the most unlikely places. It shows how small a circle of acquaintances we actually move in, even when we traverse great distances in an attempt to lose them.

"I had an idea he'd be up at the university about then, so I said at random to this old shaver: 'Would that be when he was up at Oxford?' and he stared at me as if I was talking Hindustani. Then he muttered something about 'another Mr. Carmichael' and beetled off down the street shaking his head as if he had a bee in it."

"Odd," I said.

"You don't think he's a fraud, by any chance? Somebody impersonating Colin Carmichael?"

"Oh no," I said. "I'd take my oath on that. He was just as insufferable when he was at school."

Andrew when he gets an idea hates having to give it up. "Has he any distinguishing marks?" he asked. "Birthmarks or anything?"

"If he has he's never showed them to me."

I thought it over for a moment, but a dozen little tricks of expression and manner which Colin had had as a boy and still slipped into occurred to me: his habit of scratching the bridge of his nose when he was stuck for something to say, and of sniffing at regular intervals while he was reading. There was no question about his identity.

"It's strange that he didn't show up to collect the rent," I said. "It was due last Saturday."

"I thought that at the time; he's always been pretty punctual."

"I've a feeling we shan't be here much longer," I said. "I suppose you haven't heard of anywhere else?"

Andrew hadn't, of course, but he had had the same premonition, and had been looking around. One thing that made both of us suspicious was that Colin hadn't suggested bringing anyone else in to occupy Dicky's room; we couldn't believe he'd neglected that out of sentiment. It never occurred to either of us that he could have had any kind of an accident during the week he hadn't been home; accidents don't happen to people like him.

Colin set our minds at rest by showing up the next day. He came into my room and sat down in my easy chair with an air of exhaustion, and I guessed what was coming. I wondered idly how he was going to get round the rent restrictions, but I had no doubt he could manage it. As if he had sensed it also, Andrew appeared in the doorway; Colin looked from him to me and then down at his fingernails. He flicked a mote of ash from his tie.

"I'm afraid I've got bad news," he said. He intercepted a glance that passed between Andrew and me and said sharply: "Has anybody called?"

"An old fellow called who said he used to be your caretaker twelve years ago," said Andrew. "I told him you were still away."

"Did he ask for me personally?"

"He asked for Mr. Carmichael."

Colin relaxed. "Twelve years ago," he said thoughtfully. "I'm afraid I can't remember who that would be. Well," he continued, reverting gleefully to his evil tidings, "the news is this: we've got to get out of this house." He looked from one to the other of us, and I could see his courage rising as neither of us offered a protest.

"We?" said Andrew inquiringly at length. "Are you going too?"

That took the wind out of his sails for a moment. "Well, I don't know yet," he said. "I may have to sell it and get what money I can back on it. But the fact is they've found a clause in the lease which says I can't sublet or take in lodgers."

"Who are 'they'?"

"The mortgagers."

"But we're friends visiting you," said Sam Mahony, who had arrived in time to get the gist of this explanation. "We don't pay any rent—just slip you a fiver now and again by way of expressing our gratitude. They can't object to that."

It seemed that they could, though Colin got rather muddled when he tried to explain to Sam, who had the legal taste for absolute precision. Sam refused to see when he was beaten, and went on decimating one point after another of Colin's arguments without seeing that his case was not really based on argument at all, but on

his determination to be rid of us. "I wish you'd let me handle it," Sam said after a convincing display of erudition. "I'd soon show them they haven't got a leg to stand on."

"I'm immensely grateful," said Colin, who was keeping his temper with difficulty. "But I'd rather keep clear of the law; it's a costly business."

"Ah now, Carmichael, that's unfriendly; you know I'd consider it a duty to the community—and so it would be. We're all as deeply involved in this as you are, after all."

"I know you are, old chap; I know how awkward it is for all of you, and I can only say I'm sorry."

I was almost sorry for him; after all, it was rather hard on him if he really couldn't stand the sight of us any longer and the law didn't offer him any method of getting us out of his house. When Sam opened his mouth to produce another judgment in his own support, I forestalled him. "How long can you give us?" I asked.

"They'll have to get a court order," said Sam. "That'll take them several months."

"I said we'd be out in a week."

"In a week? You're crazy."

"My dear man," said Colin, mounting his high horse, "I'm trying to be as accommodating to them as possible. I realise that I'm in the wrong, and I want to convince them that I erred in ignorance. If I don't it's going to cost me a pretty penny."

"Sheer flannel," said Sam. "They're just putting on the screws. No court would let them make a farthing out of you for housing homeless heroes."

"My dear Sam, you're not a high court judge yet."

Sam's eyes opened wide; it dawned upon him that Colin for some reason did not want his professional

advice. But all he said was: "Dear boy, high court judges don't deal with disputes between citizens. Try the King's Bench."

"I shall try only to keep the whole affair out of any court of law, and I hope you'll help me by moving out at the first opportunity."

At the end of the week I returned to my Bloomsbury hotel, and Andrew came with me. We loaded a taxi to the roof when we moved, and we got everything on but a case of Andrew's textbooks and my case. We left those in a cupboard in Andrew's room, with a note tied on to the case to say we would call back for them, but it was several weeks before we remembered to do so.

We went round together to fetch them, just in case there should be any unpleasantness. A tidy middle-aged maidservant answered our ring, and I asked for Mr. Carmichael. We were shown into the room we had first entered when I had come to see the place with Colin; the chintz-covered chairs and the heavy velvet curtains were back in their original places. A cairn terrier which had been lying on the hearthrug jumped up and yapped at us, and was called out of the room by the maid. Andrew and I stood and looked dubiously at each other; our ideas of Colin's milieu underwent a sudden metamorphosis. Andrew said softly: "Who on earth do you suppose he's living with now?"

The door opened then and a tall, stooping, broad-shouldered old man with beetle brows and thin white hair stood in the entrance staring at us. "Yes?" he said. The interrogative was doubtful; he might just as easily have been finishing a conversation with somebody outside the door, and Andrew and I both decided that the monosyllable was not addressed to us and waited for a more promising opening. None came. After a moment he said "Yes" again, loudly and peevishly.

I said: "May we see Mr. Carmichael?"

"You may, if you open your eyes. You can't miss him."

"Mr. Colin Carmichael," supplemented Andrew. The old man turned on him and gave him a look which would have shrivelled anybody more combustible than Andrew. "You may see him or you may not," he said, "but you're not likely to see him around *this* house in my lifetime. I suppose you are two of the young whippersnappers who've been helping him to wreck my house while I'm looking after my interests abroad. Good grief, we're in a bad way when we have to call in the police to protect our property from our relations and their cronies. Strewth, you're cooler customers than my nephew, coming back here and asking to see him. He has at least the grace to keep out of my way."

I said feebly: "We thought the house was Colin's."

The old man stared at me under his eyebrows. "The more fool you," he said, "to think that cretin had it in him to get or keep a roof over his head." Then he shouted over his shoulder through the door which was still standing open: "Betty, where are you? These gentlemen can't find the door."

Andrew said firmly: "I left some textbooks here which I am anxious to collect. I've no other reason to wish to see Mr. Carmichael, who in my opinion is little better than a crook."

The old man was a little mollified at this, but he said, though rather less forcibly: "Your opinion is no doubt very interesting, but I'd be grateful if you'd keep it for your friends."

"May I have my books?"

"There are no books of yours in this house; any rubbish we found here was given to the dustmen."

"They were not rubbish; they were valuable textbooks—medical textbooks, and worth a considerable amount of money."

"Then there will be no need for me to offer the dustmen a Christmas box."

Andrew got very red; for a moment I thought he was going to burst into tears. Then he strode forward, pushed past the old man and ran across the hall and up the stairs. Carmichael senior ran after him and was about to start up in pursuit when I came to life. I called him.

"One moment, Mr. Carmichael." He stopped, stared at me, then came back into the room and picked up the telephone. I put my finger on the receiver-rest.

"Mr. Carmichael, your nephew's name is the same as yours. We may not be the only people to confuse the two of you if this story gets to the public. Colin gave us to understand this was his house; he took a sizeable rent from four of us every week; he bullied Dicky Sefton into suicide; he turned us all out at a week's notice, I suppose because he heard that you were coming home. We agree with you, Mr. Carmichael, that your nephew is a peculiarly nasty type of insect. We left some of our property here in all innocence, thinking that Colin would still be occupying the house for some weeks at least, and you haven't a shadow of a right to stop us taking it away. If you've done as you say and disposed of our things, it may be necessary for us to take legal advice on the matter; if they're still there, we'll let it rest."

I took my finger off the receiver-rest and he put the telephone down. Andrew came clattering down the stairs with his suitcase and my easel, his mouth set and his eyes shining, ready to throw them both at anyone who stood in his way. Mr. Carmichael said no more, but he looked daggers. I took my easel, bowed to him,

and went out of the door. I had the utmost difficulty in keeping my face the way I was going; I think we both half expected a bullet in the back before we slammed the door behind us. The maid Betty discreetly kept out of the way.

"THAT isn't all?" I asked. Charles had stopped talking. The storm had passed over, but the rain still fell with a steady hiss on the tarmac; behind it the roar of the sea sounded like a roll of drums drawn out to infinity.

"Isn't it enough?"

It was not enough to explain his distress and violence during the afternoon, or the grave in the garden and the story of the starlings; he had not related it as if he had expected it to be enough, and I felt his pause to be a breach of confidence. "Enough for what?" I asked.

"Enough to convince you that he's a nasty piece of work?"

"Oh, quite enough for that," I agreed. "But is that all you wanted—to warn me against him?"

"That's all," he said. "You see, I know he's about on the island. You may meet him, and he has rather a talent for making use of people."

"You implied things much worse than that this afternoon."

"Forget all I said this afternoon; I was out of my senses."

I had thought he had wanted my help, and I was disappointed. It seemed hardly fair in the circumstances to have dragged me into his affairs at all, as he had done so coolly by settling in my camp. I climbed into my sleeping-bag and began to review the plans I had made for the four days which remained before the mailboat called; Charles' arrival had driven them completely out of my head. Tomorrow I decided I would set out for

Stack Head with my camera and see what unusual studies I could make among the dense bird-population of the cliff face, and the next day I would spend in the heather stalking the moorland birds.

"This storm is a godsend," Charles remarked out of the dark.

"So you said before. I can't say I agree with you."

"There'll be a dangerous swell for days; he'll never be able to get a boat out."

I said nothing. I was never certain which of his remarks I was intended to overhear. His conversation seemed always to be addressed primarily to himself, yet in the hope that some outsider might catch the inflection. He talked to himself as a man might talk to an armed madman who held him up—reasoning loudly, unable to call for help, yet hoping against hope the passer-by would understand his desperate position. The indirect appeal was strangely disturbing, but I ignored it. There was no sign of the gun that was trained on him, and it was difficult to believe in the pressure he was under when he so obstinately refused to show it.

"I should have thought of that this afternoon; there may be a boat at Harbister."

I listened to the furious voice of the sea, and silently agreed with him; no boat would ever get clear of the breakers in such weather. "Would he have a motor boat?" I asked.

"It's unlikely; Harbister's been empty since last summer. But there may be a dinghy."

"No one would be mad enough to try to take a dinghy out in this."

"No. So I must get back to Harbister in the morning and put it out of action before it gets calmer."

"Charles," I said, "wouldn't it be better to let him get away?"

"No."

"What are you going to do if you meet him? There's no law here, until the mailboat comes, and if there were, you haven't a case against him."

He did not answer. I lay with my hands clasped under my head, while his plan slowly came clear to me. For some reason, perhaps because he had not enough proof, Charles meant to take the law into his own hands; he was battenning down the hatches on Colin Carmichael—and incidentally on me, though I did not think of that until later. So he meant to take action before the mailboat called—and violent action. But if he had not enough proof to satisfy the law, had he enough to satisfy any one? And was there any way I could prevent it?

He must have guessed what I was thinking, for he said sharply, in a voice which was unmistakeably addressed to me and not to himself:

"You'd better keep out of this, do you hear? It's none of your business."

In a strange way it was a relief to have my presence really recognized; it seemed to open channels to reason, though his voice did not sound reassuring. "It's a pity you dragged me into it," I said coldly. "I never asked to be mixed up in your private vendettas."

"There's no reason why you should be; you'd better get down to Ham Farm and stay there till the mailboat comes."

"And pay three guineas a week while you take over my site and provisions? I never heard of such a bloody nerve."

Charles began to laugh, weakly, but not hysterically, and I took advantage of his momentary relaxation to venture a piece of advice. "If he's done whatever it is you think he has," I said, "the proof will turn up, and then you can get him arrested."

"If I can catch him. It'll have to turn up before the mailboat comes; if he gets away then he'll get straight out of the country."

"Then we must find the proof before then; but you'll have to tell me what we're looking for."

"We're looking for the body."

"Do you know whose body it is?"

"It was my wife's."

Then he told me the rest of the story. The Blake Farrar syndicate had seemed at first to be a promising opening—for a time he was their only supplier, and he made a good income. There seemed to be a steady demand in America for Blake Farrars; they were decently middle-brow, middle-priced and middle-sized—the syndicate insisted on a size of two feet by eighteen inches; they said it made a lot of difference to the sales. He found a reasonable flat at last in an unfashionable suburb, and he decided to get married while the going was good.

"I ought never to have married," he said. "I found that out before very long. I never meant to when I started, but Evadne was too clever for me. She managed to convince me that my way of living was primitive in the extreme, and that I was too oafish even to see that anything was wrong. There simply isn't any answer to that one, is there? She implied that she could set everything right in no time if she came to live with me. but she wasn't coming without marriage. I fell for it like Newton's apple."

"I never met the man yet who hadn't been trapped into marriage," I remarked.

Charles was silent for a moment; it hadn't occurred to him, I suppose, that I might see Evadne's side of the question. "It's true we're a lot of gudgeons," he replied at last. "You must be quite simple, Theresa, if you haven't pulled it off yet. Or have you?"

"I did once," I said. "But it was so small I threw it back again; it seemed brutal."

"You were a sportswoman; Evadne wasn't. She didn't mind how small they were; she thought she could fatten them up. She tried fattening me up for a time, and I suppose I enjoyed it. She could cook, and she mended my clothes and made the bed and made me shave. She was smart and pretty; oh yes, the honeymoon was all right; I'll give her that."

"But it didn't last?" I prompted when he fell silent.

"No—none of it lasted. The demand for my Blake Farrars fell, and the syndicate started the commission racket; after a while I discovered that they had taken on some other producers. That meant my income fell, and economics got difficult. Evadne wasn't extravagant, but she had her standards, and she wouldn't alter them for hell or high water. After a while she tumbled to the fact that there was no money in art even if you were a genius, and that quite possibly I wasn't anything more than a practised craftsman. Then she decided that I ought to do something else; there were plenty of other jobs where a regular income could be made, and I ought to take one—I owed it to her to take one; she told me so several times a day.

"I suppose I neglected her—things got pretty strained between us. And at last she decided that she was going out to earn money for herself. I made no objection; I thought it was the most sensible suggestion she had made for a long time, and my meekness made her more angry than ever. She said if she had been a man she would have been ashamed to let a woman keep her—not that she ever showed any willingness to keep me. She kept every penny she earned. Only once or twice on a payday she brought home something extra to eat, and then she was always careful to point it out."

"But she went on cooking and cleaning, I gather."

"Oh yes—I told you she had her standards."

"She must have worked pretty hard."

"So did I," retorted Charles touchily. "I worked eighteen hours a day—I always do."

"At the work you enjoy."

"At the only work I can do."

"I don't think you're being fair to Evadne," I said.

"And if it's Evadne's grave that we saw today, you ought to be. She's dead."

I think Charles had forgotten that. He was silent for a long time, and at last he said: "I know it must sound pretty horrible, but I stopped loving her a long time ago. I suppose I felt she was dead then. Nothing that's happened since could have been as bad."

"She got a job as a typist for a firm of bookmakers," he went on presently, "and it was there she met Colin. He was a regular customer, apparently. I knew she was going out with somebody, but I didn't know who it was, and I didn't much care—till one evening she let out his name accidentally. In fact, she called me Colin; it made my flesh creep. I asked her who Colin was, and she said it was someone at the office. When I suggested that his other name might be Carmichael she said yes, it was, and looked at me as if I were a wizard. Then I gave her a long lecture warning her against him, and at the end of it she told me I was jealous and she didn't believe a word of it. What more could I do? I began to feel Colin was appointed by the gods to dog me all my life long."

"Evadne went off with him two months later; I don't know how soon they came up to Harbister. She left me a very brief note and said nothing about a divorce, so I gathered Colin had been cleverer than I had—which didn't surprise me in the least. That was over three

years ago—yes, I hadn't realised it was such ancient history."

"And you haven't seen her since?" I asked.

"No."

"Or Colin?"

"I met him once in the street."

"What makes you think she's dead? Just intuition?"

My blood gave a great surge of hope at the idea that that was all he had to go on, that somewhere on the face of the earth Evadne and Colin were still wrangling out their nasty little lives. But Charles soon crushed it.

"I had a letter from her over a year ago," he said, "addressed from Harbister.

"It was a very unhappy letter. Colin had presumably got through all his money. He had tried to live on Evadne's earnings in London, but Evadne wasn't having any. She suggested Harbister, which was all he had left; he couldn't sell it because it was left to a cousin if he died without offspring. I dare say she liked the sound of it too—I expect Colin cracked it up a bit: a mansion in Scotland, shooting and fishing and so on, with doubtless a few neighbouring dukes or earls. So to Harbister they had come, and when she wrote to me they had been there eighteen months. 't didn't suit either of them. They had barely enough money to live on even here; Colin was getting morose and Evadne, who had never in her life before lived out of shopping distance from Oxford Street, was utterly miserable. She wanted me to send her some nylons.

"She didn't say so in so many words, but I gathered she was very much afraid of Colin's temper. He was getting whisky cheaply from somewhere—I believe Ham Farm do a bit of distilling on the quiet; she said he spent a lot of time over there. She herself did nothing except housework and saw nobody; she hadn't even a dog—

only the lame starling I told you about, and from the way she went on about that I realised how lonely she must be. She never got a chance to get off the island; when the mailboat came Colin was always around, and it was he who went over to mainland when they needed more provisions. It was quite plain she wanted me to come and rescue her, but I wasn't falling for that one. I had seen enough both of her and Colin, and I didn't think he was likely to do her any harm while she could be useful to him. I argued that if she had really been desperate she could have appealed to the Ham Farm people, or to the captain of the mailboat. Now that I'm here and have seen Ham Farm and seen how busy the mailboat is when it arrives, and how quickly it nips away again, I realise that she wouldn't have had much chance if Colin was watching her."

"What's the matter with Ham Farm?" I asked.

"Nothing in the ordinary way. But the people are so used to hardship nothing could touch them. They don't know the meaning of fear, and nothing would ever catch them napping. They'd never believe Evadne could be fool enough to land herself in such a nasty hole. And Colin was always with them. He was a friend of theirs, so either he must have made himself very nice to them or they were very nasty. I think he must have been pleasant; they're shrewd, tough people, but not unkindly. And there's a girl there—quite a pretty one, who lapped up anything I had to say about Colin. She seemed to know much more about him than the parents did, which made me think he might have a good reason for getting rid of Evadne."

"Not very substantial," I said. "That and the starling that's all you have to go on?"

"Not quite. I sent her some nylons, and I got a note back thanking me for them, and saying that Colin had

seen the parcel and been very angry with her for getting in touch with me. She said she was afraid of him and that I'd better not write again.

"I made up my mind to visit Harbister when I had the time and money to spare. I ought to have come straight away, but I wasn't anxious to see her again."

"When did you get the letter?"

"A year last April. I meant to come up last summer, but a few months after that I heard by chance that they had left Harbister. I ran into old Carmichael senior, the uncle, and I took my courage in both hands and stopped him and inquired after his nephew. To my surprise he was quite civil; he said Colin had been in London, and was now down in Devon. I think he thought I was after Colin's blood and would have been glad to be of any assistance. I didn't ask whether Evadne was with him.

"But she must have been. The Ham Farm people say they both came up here by plane for a stay late in the autumn. They knew Evadne came up then, and of course they presumed she had gone away with him again."

"Perhaps she did. Charles, have you made any inquiries? She might be at her parents' home, or back at her job in London."

"Her parents were dead before I married her, and the bookmakers knew nothing about her. They'd seen Colin though, and I met him on the escalator at Holborn station as I was going away. He didn't look any too pleased to see me, and tried to cut me, but I cornered him and asked after Evadne. He said he hadn't seen her for a year, but he had that glazed abstracted look he always has when he's lying. And of course as soon as I got up here I found that was a cock-and-bull story. I mentioned that I was coming up here for a holiday,

and he got very surly. I was so worried that I came up straight away, several weeks earlier than I'd said I was coming, thinking he might come back to try to cover up his tracks. I was right too—our visits coincided. But it looks as if he's beaten me to the body."

"You think he buried her in the garden and dug her up again for fear you might find it?"

"Don't you? I haven't found much to work on since I came. The Hain Farm people told me no more than I've told you. They were very vague about Evadne—hardly seemed to think she was a human being. The girl knew most about her; she said she thought Evadne had been ill when they came up here last autumn, and that they had come up for the sake of the air. I ask you, Harbister in winter as a health resort! But they didn't seem to think it funny. They said Colin only stayed a fortnight.

"I tried to find out from the girl what were Evadne's symptoms, but she seemed suddenly to jump to the conclusion that I was up to no good; she looked scared and shut up in the middle of a sentence. Something clicked in my memory then; I remembered Colin's illness when he was at school, and I realised that they had just been in Devonshire before they came up here. The berries on that little tree under the commonroom window would have been in season. I was sure the tree would still be there; nothing ever changes, except the population.

"It was you who provided the real evidence, and I'm dead sure now that that's what happened. I suppose he crushed the berries and mixed them in her food, and Evadne's starling shared them with her. She'd probably already had a dose or two before they left Devon. We haven't much hope now of finding the body, but I shall have a good shot at providing another one instead."

I AWOKE next morning to find myself facing an unfamiliar wall of mouldering concrete patterned with green stains. At the back of my mind was a medley of disturbing memories, dreams intermingled with Charles' story of the night before, which gradually disentangled itself into an equally troubling reality. Charles himself was sleeping peacefully, his breathing long and steady, and I got up quietly without waking him, hoping he would have slept off his fever when he woke. Outside, the storm had left the island as fresh as Eden. The air seemed to scintillate; there was no word for the colours of sea and sand and grass, and the marvellous whiteness of the gulls against the blue. A fresh wind blew from the south, and I could hear the roar of the waves against the cliffs at Harbister; that too seemed amplified and rejuvenated. It was as if a veil had been lifted from all my senses.

I went down to the shore and lay in the shallows, slapped by the breakers until I tingled. Right out as far as the horizon the sea was tufted with the manes of sea horses; they pranced and glittered like a circus team. I stayed in water of no more than two feet depth, for beyond that I could feel the undertow catching at my thighs. Then I raced back for my breakfast feeling as young as the morning.

But at the back of my mind, overlaid by this unexpected ecstasy, were the things which had to be dragged out into the light of day and sorted into something which

would make sense. Then if I believed his story—and I knew I did—I must help Charles; not to do murder himself, according to his plan, but to prevent the murderer's escape from the island and to find some proof which would satisfy the law; I had no doubt that something would turn up, but I had to consider what was to be done if it didn't. It seemed probable that there would be nothing for it then but to endeavour to keep the length of the island between them, to hinder Charles in every way and to help Colin Carmichael to escape. I could see that circumstantial evidence of the subjective kind Charles had collected would make little impression on the captain of the mailboat. He was the law as far as we were concerned, but it would need a pretty clear-cut case to make him undertake the responsibility of action, for his authority was ambiguous and at best only a makeshift until the police could be brought to the scene.

I hated the idea of having to thwart Charles; there was no doubt that he would bear a deep and lasting grudge against me, and if I succeeded it was unlikely that he would ever forgive me. He had not cared for Evadne, but revenge for Evadne's death was more important to him now than comfort or peace of mind or even life itself. I wondered why that was, and I was unhappily aware that jealousy seemed the only motive; in his heart Charles had been mortified by his failure with Evadne, and he envied Colin his effortless success.

But even if he had loved Evadne, she was dead. I was filled with a sense of personal triumph in simply being alive that morning, and in having Charles near me. But I could think of nothing I could do to help him. To search the island for Evadne's body seemed impossible and would probably be wasted labour; the obvious thing for Colin to do, having his aircraft handy, would be to dump it out at sea, and we couldn't plumb

the ocean. Only a chance in a thousand would put it in our way, and I decided that all I could do was to carry out my own tentative plans for passing the time and keep my eyes open.

There was another thing that troubled me, and that was Colin's motive. Listening to Charles' recital the night before, I had never felt that there was any difficulty about it. Evadne was an impossible creature, and anyone on whom she fastened herself would have been justified in wishing her out of the way. But that had been in the dark and the storm, when life was threatened on all sides and seemed at best a precarious, feeble thing; this morning it was omnipotent, and the man who challenged it must have had either the courage of Lucifer or a desperate incentive.

I could not believe that Colin was cast in a heroic mould, but there was no indication in what Charles had told me of any incentive. Considering the characters of the two principals, it could hardly have been a "crime passionnel". Evadne was plainly the clinging type, but Colin had no responsibilities towards her; what bothered me was, why he had troubled to kill her when it would have been so easy just to abandon her on Harbister or anywhere else? She had no shadow of a legal claim against him. There must, I decided, have been dark moments in Colin's past and Evadne had found out something about them; but if he was a professional criminal he did not seem to have been a very successful one, for they had retired to Harbister owing to shortage of money.

That might have been Colin's story for Evadne, but there was some evidence that it was not true. If so, how had they suddenly been enabled to pack up and leave Harbister, spend the summer in idleness down south and return in a plane? Even an old and inelegant

aircraft costs money to buy and to maintain. I thought of the logbook in the aircraft pocket which Charles had sent to the bottom of the sea, and I wished devoutly that he had kept it.

It was midday when Charles woke up, and he came out cursing himself for being so late. But the long hours of sleep had done their work and he seemed cool and even placid.

"I'm going to Harbister," he told me, as if to impress upon me that his plans had not been changed with his changed appearance.

"Do you want me to come?"

"Of course not, unless you'd like to."

"What are you expecting to find there?" I asked. "Colin?"

"It's not very likely. He'll keep away from it if he's missed the aircraft. But I've got to see if there's a boat, and look for the berries. He may have dropped some."

"What a hope!" I said. "A needle in a haystack would be easier."

"I don't know about that. There was hardly any furniture in the house when they came up last November. I ought to be able to find which room they used, and I shall go over that with a toothcomb."

"Charles," I said, "did you happen to notice, when you looked through that aircraft logbook, how Colin had come by it, or who had owned it before him?"

Charles looked a little embarrassed, and then defiant. "There's no doubt that it was his," he said. "I recognized the gloves as Evadne's."

"You mean Colin's name wasn't given in the book?"

"I only had a casual glance, but I didn't see it."

"Did you see anyone's?"

"There was one that meant nothing to me—Andersen, H. K. Andersen."

"Funny," I said. "How could he get away with a logbook in someone else's name?"

"He may have passed himself off as Andersen, when it became necessary. From the looks of the machine, I should think he serviced her himself."

"Stolen it, perhaps, you think?"

"Borrowed it, more likely, from someone who was going abroad or was too broke to keep it up."

"I'll come with you to the loch," I said. "I'm going to spend the day on Stack Head watching the birds."

"After all, that is what I came for," I added, seeing that he looked a trifle disapproving. "If you think of anything I can do, let me know—I'll do anything I can, of course. But just at present I don't see that there's any way I can help."

"You could go over to Ham Farm and make inquiries."

"Oh no, thank you. I'll wait for you to do that—they're friends of yours."

I left him at the loch and went on towards Stack Head, which was the highest peak in the circle of hillocks surrounding the little crater in which the tarn lay. The hillock had no further slope; from its summit a precipice dropped down into the sea, and from the rocks at the foot of this scarp several huge granite chimneys rose almost to the level of the cliff top. The furthest of these was fifty yards from the land.

These chimneys and the face of the cliff were crowded with sea-birds and white with their droppings. On the furthest rock the shags and cormorants were packed on to every inch of foothold, as black as night, their long necks curled between their shoulders or incongruously stretched to preen. Here and there in the surrounding sea the necks of others cut the water like periscopes, straight as ramrods and going full steam ahead. Now

and again one would dive off the rock and disappear beneath the surface, popping up after several minutes in the corner of my field of vision. A few herring gulls sat uncasily among them, but they were restless and constantly rising to circle round, whereas many of the cormorants seemed to be frozen to the rock.

I walked round on to a small peninsula from which I had a good view of the stacks and of the face of Stack Head itself. Birds were squatting on every ledge there, while others hovered around seeking a landing-place. Kittiwakes and fulmars were still nesting on the upper ledges, and their mates came planing and tacking down to them. On the shelves of rock near the surface of the water hundreds of black and white shearwaters were ranked and filed like penguins. When I lay gazing over the edge of the cliff I could see them hunting beneath the clear green water, as swift and purposeful as predatory fish, hardly a bubble marking their passage.

A shrill nostalgic screaming went on continuously. Duels were fought over a coveted inch of foothold, white wings beating and an occasional feather fluttering in slow circles down to the water, while all the neighbouring birds shrieked raucously. A successful fisher taking to the air with his catch was chased and harried by half a dozen envious pursuers. A shearwater surfacing with his trophy sometimes lost it again in his efforts to defend it against his rapacious relations. The struggle seemed as fierce and vocal and continuous as it is in Petticoat Lane.

The promontory of cliff on which I sat was undermined at its base, and a bulging wall of rock hid from my sight the breakers at its foot. I could hear them, and occasionally felt their spray, but the patch of water I could see was sleek and clear, and the shearwaters darted smoothly beneath its surface. Their favourite fishing ground appeared to be directly beneath me, under the bulge in

the rock; there was a continuous traffic from there to the rock-shelves at the foot of Stack Head where they landed and squatted in the sun. They seemed always to be successful; often they were gulping down their catch as they came to the surface. I began to feel curious about this happy-hunting-ground which was so rich in game; shoals of fish rarely come so far inshore in deep water. I wanted to get closer to the water too, and if possible to get pictures of the movements of the birds as they dived and surfaced.

The bulge in the cliff made that particular spot impossible; I left my peninsula and went cautiously along the few yards of cliff between it and the Stack Head opposite. A little gully which separated them went down to within twenty feet of the water, and a trickling stream, now almost extinguished, crept through it and dripped down the smooth rock face into the sea.

The gully was narrow and almost dark; its sides were slippery with moss and I went very carefully, afraid both for my bones and my camera. Once on the floor of the gully it was easy going, for I could touch both walls and I handed myself along by them towards the outlet. There I lay down, disregarding the damp, and peered out and down into a deep green pool below the rock on which I had been sitting. Every time a large wave came I had to draw back hastily to dodge the spray. Worse still, the shearwaters had seen me, and hunting was at a standstill. I had to lie motionless on the ice-cold stone for twenty minutes before they ventured out again and I could follow their passage across the pool.

Their streamlined shadows were less distinct from here than they had been from the top of the cliff, for the bulging cliff shaded their objective. But my eyes adjusted themselves gradually, and I located the fruitful fishing ground. There was a dark amorphous mass under the

lee of the cliff, and intermittent flashes of silver on its fringe showed where the fish tugged and wriggled. They were there in hundreds feeding on something, and it was some minutes before it dawned upon me what it was. Then I almost fell into the pool myself in horror and excitement, for I guessed that I had found Evadne's body.

A VERY brief look around satisfied me that the body could only be reached from a boat; I breathed more freely then, for Charles could not blame me for not following up my discovery. I could not for the life of me have brought myself to touch the corpse; even to approach nearer to see whether my intuition could be relied on would have been beyond me. All I could do was to stare at it fixedly, horribly fascinated, until I could make out or imagined I could make out the shape of a hand and arm reached out towards me. That finished me; I backed through the gully in dangerous haste and scrambled out of it again, and put twenty yards between myself and the cliff edge before I stopped to think what was to be done.

I was on the highest point of the island, and could see the loch with its rampart of little hills on one side, and on the other Harbister House, the slope behind it, and the hide which marked the hen-harrier's nest. The airfield lay beyond the ridge of hills, hidden in the dip, but I could see the northern end of the island beyond it stretching out towards Ham Farm, which was also out of sight in a hollow. The sparkling sea, the big white clouds scalloping the horizon and the vivid green of the patches of bracken on the hills made the memory of that deep green pool and its occupant seem like a nightmare in broad daylight. I watched Harbister, wondering if I should see Charles there or if he had gone back to the airfield; it seemed impossible to decide in which direction

to move without some glimpse of him or clue to his movements. I felt that if I went down to Harbister and did not find him I should lose control of myself and perhaps betray my find to an unseen watcher, if Colin should be hidden anywhere around. Colin and Evadne seemed to my shocked imagination equally present and equally dangerous, but of the two I preferred the idea of meeting Colin.

I decided at last that I could not face Harbister, and I set off across the springy heather towards the airfield. Each step that took me further from Stack Head lifted my spirits; when I reached the hen-harrier's nest I approached it warily, keeping the hide between it and myself, and I saw the great bird alight, tear up a rat she had brought and drop it into the maws of the newly-hatched chicks.

I was so absorbed that for a moment I forgot my discovery and the vital news I had for Charles; I crouched in the hide with my camera ready, but the click of the shutter disturbed her and she covered the chicks at once. I dared not spend time there, but as I backed out I peered through a chink up at the skyline, and at once I lay flat again, holding my breath.

A man was walking across the heather, heading for the cliffs beyond the loch, a tall loosely-built man carrying a gallon petrol can in either hand. He would pass within a few yards of my shelter, and I thanked heaven Charles had a talent for camouflage; no one unaware of the hide would have looked twice at the heather-covered hump. His whole appearance impressed itself upon me in vivid detail: I noticed his shabby clothes, the knuckles shining on the handles of the petrol cans. I searched every feature of his face; it wore an expression of stern concentration which once quivered and dissolved into a look of wide-eyed panic. At the same moment his steady pace

quicken and he stumbled over the roots of the heather; I had a feeling that he was nervously aware of another human presence, but he did not stop to look around. On a sudden impulse, when he was closest to me I lifted my camera and took a careful snap of him.

I soon saw that he was heading for the dip in the hills where we had found the aircraft, and I lay watching him and wondering what in the world would be the end of his horrible predicament. It was difficult now to feel that he was dangerous, and when I thought of the bloated corpse in the water I couldn't help but hope that its death had been accidental. Then I remembered the bezoar stone and the carefully-timed trip to Devon, and the picture of cold calculation drove out the pity roused by the glimpse of his weakness. That weakness was proof against anything but danger to himself.

I waited a while, but he did not reappear on the lip of the valley, and at last I ventured out and made my way back to the camp, keeping as far as possible to the hollows of the uneven ground. I did not know what I was going to tell Charles; on the whole, I thought it better not to mention that I had seen Colin Carmichael, for fear he should set out to find and finish him. I was determined that if the price of Charles' good conduct was Colin's escape, it should be managed; for I couldn't deny to myself that Charles' safety was beginning to assume a disproportionate importance in my thoughts.

He caught up with me when I had reached the edge of the airfield; I did not hear him coming, and jumped a yard when he spoke to me. "You're too nervy," he said. "It's all this excitement of watching the courtship of the red-breasted merganser. You ought to come corpse-hunting with me."

"Don't say you've found one!" I said, suddenly over-

whelmed with horror at the idea that his quest too might have been successful.

"Not a corpse exactly, but something I'd hardly thought I'd have the luck to spot." He opened his hand and showed me two shrivelled yellow berries. "They were between the floor boards in one of the rooms."

"I think I've seen the body," I said, and suddenly found myself weeping. Between sniffs I told him what I had seen. Charles took my arm and listened gravely; I said nothing about seeing Colin.

"You're sure it can't be reached except from a boat?"

"Certain."

"We'll have to go over to Ham Farm then, and borrow theirs; there's no sign of one at Harbister." We walked the rest of the way back to the camp in silence. Charles was preoccupied, I supposed, by the thought of seeing Evadne again in such gruesome circumstances, and I was sunk in a deep depression because his memories were something I could not share; it made no difference that they were unpleasant ones.

We had a hasty snack and then went on to Ham Farm, filled with a new purposefulness. There was something to be done, and in the doing of it we forgot for a moment the unpleasantness of the task. Anything was better than sitting waiting for the mailboat and wondering what Colin Carmichael would do next. I wondered what his reaction would be when he missed the aircraft, and whether the search for it was likely to take him as far as Stack Head.

"It would be awful if he found the body," I remarked aloud.

"Awful," agreed Charles. "But he's not likely to be looking for it. I expect he took it some way out before he dropped it, and the storm washed it in."

We mounted the rise which hid Ham Farm from the airfield and looked down on it. It was a cluster of rough stone buildings close to the shore; no garden, and only a small patch of thin oats behind it. There was a number of cattle grazing round it and a couple of goats tethered near the door. The slope behind it was dotted with chicken-houses, but the hens were mostly pecking around the farmyard or along the edge of the oatfield, which was netted to protect it from them. Cows and hens shared the grazing; a black and white sheepdog blind in one eye ran up to sniff at us from a safe distance, and then retreated barking towards the cowshed. A girl coming away from the henhouses carrying a bucket saw Charles and waved to him.

"That's Alison," he said, a note of pleasure in his voice.

"Enter the heroine," I said a trifle sourly, and he laughed, but more in embarrassment, I thought, than in derision.

Ham Farm was primitive in the extreme, but there was an air of rough prosperity about it; you could not imagine that the occupants lacked any essential, though it was evident that they never even felt the need of many things which I should have thought necessities—hot water, for instance, and spring mattresses. We entered through a crazy doorway dropped into such a slant that it was plain no ordinary-shaped door would fit it. It was probably very rarely closed, for most of the light in the low room came through it. The stone floor was partly covered by an ancient turkey carpet, which the ceaseless action of sun and salt had faded till it was almost indistinguishable from the earth; there was a bright fire blazing on the hearth, though it was midsummer, and a delicious smell of baking bread. Two healthy-looking geranium plants almost blocked the little window; opposite to it there was

a deep recess in the wall hidden behind a faded green curtain which I guessed was Alison's bed; there were other rooms through a doorway on one side of the hearth. A large table, two bent-wood chairs and a rocking chair filled the little room, and a smart new wireless stood precariously on a stool.

"Where on earth did they put you when you stayed here?" I asked Charles.

"There's another room in the next outhouse—the visitor's room. You'd be surprised—it's very comfortable."

Alison came in after us. She was a straight, slender, pretty girl, with none of the stalwartness of an English countrywoman; very few of the islanders had. And she was certainly pleased to see Charles, though there was no coyness in her manner. She greeted me kindly, showing no surprise at my presence. Her mother came through from the back room, wiping steaming hands on her apron, and retired there again to fetch us both a glass of milk.

"Where's your father, Alison?" Charles asked. "I want to borrow his boat."

She looked at him steadily as if she could read his reasons in his eyes, and answered: "He's down at it now."

"Nothing wrong with it, I hope?"

I thought she hesitated a moment before she said: "He had it out yesterday."

"Yesterday, did he? Before the storm, I suppose?"

"Oh yes; there's been no going out since. I think he'll not be anxious to take it out just yet," she added. "There's such a swell on the sea." She looked at me and smiled. "You holiday folks are always so adventurous, but we don't believe in taking chances; you have to be on holiday to be so bold. Dad'll not let you take it out today." She spoke confidently, but her smile had faded.

"I'll go and talk to him," said Charles, and went out. I tried to think of some feminine gossip which might have been expected to interest this grey-eyed nymph, but it was not easy; her life was stripped of all the accessories on which small talk can be hung, and she herself did not seem to feel the need to make conversation. I suppose there is something about urban life which makes us feel it is uncivil to sit in silence, a need perhaps to assert a community of interests which in a smaller group can never be overlooked. At last I thought of Colin.

"I suppose you knew the people at Harbister pretty well?" I asked.

Alison looked up at me gravely and answered: "They weren't often up here, and the house is shut up now."

"And Mr. and Mrs. Carmichael won't be coming back?" I took a chance on Evadne having used Colin's name.

"Would you be a friend of theirs?" she asked me bluntly, and added before I could think of an answer to that one: "It's funny you didn't know that Mrs. Carmichael's dead. She was ill when they came up last autumn, and she died at Harbister. She's buried in the cemetery over on Rousay."

"Your parents never mentioned that to Charles."

"I dare say they didn't; it's none of their business."

"And none of mine, I suppose," I said. "No, I didn't know the Carmichaels. Charles has been telling me about them, and I couldn't think of anything else to say. He seems to be expecting Colin to come up here soon."

"I don't think it's very likely; he never cared for Harbister."

I supposed the story of Evadne's death was one that Colin had told her, and that meant that she knew him better than her parents did, since he hadn't found it necessary to excuse himself to them. But it did not seem

that she knew him well enough to care to talk about him, and presently I realised that for the moment her mind was more on Charles. I saw her look up out of her abstraction with sudden alertness when his voice sounded outside, and I thought I detected a fleeting shadow of anxiety cross her eyes. Charles and Harry Flett, the owner of the farm, came in and went through to the further room, which was the kitchen, washroom and maternity ward for the cat, who came out on their entrance followed by one kit and bearing another in her mouth. "Shoot," said Harry, following it through and helping it out of the doorway with a badly-aimed kick. He winked at me as he retreated again, and I heard Mrs. Flett's soft lilting voice raised in giggling protest. There was much smothered laughter and the glub-glub of liquid coming out of a narrow-necked bottle. I could have done with a drop of whisky myself after my experiences of the morning, but apparently it was not considered a suitable beverage for unmarried women, for neither Alison nor I were offered a drink. The pungent smell when the two men returned to the room was made all the more aggravating by their apparent unconsciousness of it.

"Will you come with us, Theresa?" Charles asked. He added in a low voice: "It's a lot to ask, but we might not find it without you."

"You're not taking the boat out?" asked Alison. She jumped to her feet, and her fair face was suddenly as pale as her ashen hair.

Harry Flett ignored her; Charles said awkwardly: "We've got to, Alison. There's a body been washed up at the foot of Stack Head."

"Some poor fool of a body out in a boat from Mainland, I dare say," said Mrs. Flett, standing in the kitchen doorway. "There's always some sort of a tragedy this

time of year, with the holiday folk thinking the sea's as safe as the lake in the park in Glasgow."

"It's the worst place you could go in a swell like this, the foot of Stack Head."

I was surprised that the older woman took it so calmly, while Alison was really frightened by the risk. Her wide eyes had widened still further, and the hand that rested on the back of the chair was clenched in a sort of desperate irritation at our stupidity.

"I hope that girl hasn't got second sight," I said to Charles as we walked down to the beach where the boat was drawn up. She had followed us out and stood a little distance from us. The men bent over the gunwales, heaving the little launch down to the water's edge, and when I looked back I saw Alison's face contorted in an agony of indecision. Then she turned her back on us suddenly and walked away, and I watched her set off up the hill towards the henhouses. As I watched, the hunched shoulders of the retreating figure somehow reminded me of another figure I had seen a few hours earlier, and an unpleasant idea came to me. I came up to the boat and lent a hand with the pushing.

"I suppose she's got plenty of petrol?" I suggested cautiously to the farmer. He grinned patronisingly and did not even trouble to nod in assent until Charles looked at him inquiringly. Then he said shortly:

"Filled her up yesterday."

"But you've been out in her since, and accidents will happen. She might have a leak. Do me a favour and check up. I've seen one corpse today, and I didn't like the look of it."

Grudgingly he tapped the petrol tank. The sound of it was not immediately reassuring, and he unscrewed the cap and peered in. Then he fetched out a wooden wand from beneath the seat and sounded it, and then he

silently with deep concentration replaced the cap and ran his fingers through his hair.

"It's low?" asked Charles.

"It's almost empty. I'll get a tin."

But first he lay down on his back under the seat and ran his finger carefully over the bottom of the tank; it was perfectly dry and there was no trace of a leak. Over his prostrate body Charles looked suspiciously at me. "I think it's you who've got second sight," he said.

II

"Ask him what kind of petrol he uses, Charles," I said. "I don't feel I'm supposed to know anything about anything so unfeminine. But I'll bet Alison knows all there is to know about it," I added. "I wonder why people always consider their own relatives to have no particular sexual characteristics."

"Defensive mechanism, I suppose. It would need to be extremely powerful in an isolated spot like this."

"Do you honestly think that remark is enlightening? What kind of a defensive mechanism? That might mean anything, and probably means you don't know."

"A limited imagination, probably. I sometimes wished mine was more so when I was staying there. She's a very pretty girl, don't you think?"

"That was why you were so anxious to exchange her company for that of a desiccated spinster—you were afraid of getting caught in the toils of matrimony again."

"Nothing of the kind," said Charles gallantly. "The reason I gave you was the only operative one." We had been sitting side by side in the stern of the boat; a steady wind snatched the words from our lips and blew them towards the land; Charles had to get up and walk forward to Flett who was seated by the tiller to make himself heard by him, and I was in a mood to think he did so with unnecessary alacrity. I felt unreasonably critical and disgruntled, and angry at having allowed myself to be drawn into this repulsive mix-up, just as I had been congratulating myself on having achieved some sort of

tranquillity, the poise that compensates for the lesser stature of one's neighbours. It did not even seem of any great significance that Evadne was floating in the water at the foot of Stack Head and her murderer alive upon the island; in a matter of decades we should all be equalised in that respect. Was there really any sense in saying human life had value, when every twenty years or so we flagrantly contradicted ourselves and set out deliberately to mutilate and destroy our neighbours? All that Colin had lacked in his deed, all the absence of which made it a crime and not a praiseworthy removal of a nuisance, was the tribal sanction. But could the law make morality? If one abandoned the natural guidance of the heart and took to logic, life was worthless. But that is what one tries to do in middle age; that was what both Charles and I had set ourselves to live by. I was suddenly appalled by the prospect; I would have liked to call out to Charles to abandon Colin and Evadne, to go back to his room at the farm and Alison's dangerous proximity. In a world of desolation that alone seemed fresh and fruitful.

I suppose I had had a shock, and I was certainly very tired. Charles staggered back to seat himself again beside me. "It's high octane," he said. "Harry says it's more expensive to buy, but cheaper in the long run because he gets so much better performance."

"You could use it in an aircraft, then."

"Yes, I believe you could."

"Did it strike you that Alison was unnecessarily worried about our turning out?"

"Not unnecessarily. You'll be worried yourself before we've been out long."

I was beginning to think that he might be right; the deceptive brightness of the day had not infected the green and turgid sea. Under the lee of the island there was a

stretch of fairly smooth water, but until we had passed the beach near the airfield it was full of shoals and underwater rocks and we had to keep out in the choppy water. Harry kept the boat's head steadily into the waves, but each one seemed higher and firmer than the last. The launch slapped into each as if she were hitting the side of a cow, and after each had passed she seemed to fall deeper into the trough of smooth green oily water.

"Versatile man, isn't he?" I remarked, watching Harry's flexible wrists managing the tiller. "It must be a good life, being a fisherman farmer."

"All right if you're born to it. Pretty deadly otherwise."

"I think I should find it satisfying enough; you would have to work to live, and one's personal relationships would be so simple."

Charles looked at me sharply, and I met his look with defiance; his face looked thinner and more eager, and his eyes shone with a steady excitement, the excitement of the hunt. I felt there could never be any sympathy between us.

"I'm afraid I shouldn't have asked you to come, Theresa; it's too much for you. Would you like to land?"

"Yes, I should," I said bitterly; I was tired of playing the plucky little woman. What fools women are, I thought, to spend their lives trying to live up to a man's ideal of them, which is utterly remote from what nature intended them to be. Why don't they make their own values?

"I shouldn't have done it, but I was so afraid we might miss the body. You do see how important it is that we should find it, don't you? We've no case without it."

"I suppose it is important to have a case, but hanging Colin won't resurrect Evadne."

"Heaven forbid!" said Charles impiously. He walked forward again and talked to Harry, and I saw the farmer shake his head; he kept the boat on her forward course and pointed to the open sea around us.

"It's no good," said Charles. "Harry says we can't turn back now. We've got to go on at least until we reach sheltered water, and when we do the cliffs will be too high for you to land. You'll just have to shut your eyes and think of something pleasant. After all, it's no use pretending that things like this don't happen."

I made no answer, and presently Charles' thoughts turned to less delicate reasons for my taciturnity. "Are you going to be sea sick?" he asked.

"I hope not—I don't think so."

"I wonder if the name of Andersen means anything to Harry?"

"Ask him," I said, not sorry to be left to my own thoughts, which I felt had more significance than his platitudes. "But for heaven's sake don't distract his attention."

Charles walked forward and squatted down by Harry. In a few seconds I was wishing him back by my side, for the only distraction from my memories of the morning was the sight of the approaching hills of water, which still seemed to increase in height and steepness. What had seemed from the shore to be nothing more than lines of light froth on the sea turned out at close quarters to be a swell of oceanic magnitude. I had never been out in such a sea before, and it was at once fearful and exhilarating. I was struck most by the magnificent timing by which we seemed to anticipate the breaking of every wave; providentially, it seemed, we were poised on its summit and dropping down into it just as the crest

curled over and disintegrated beneath us. After a while I realised that I could put complete faith in the unfailing efficiency of this providence, and then I began to enjoy myself. For the moment I forgot the object of our journey.

But I was troubled by the memory of Alison's two-timing. She had known, I felt sure, about the missing petrol, yet she had turned her back on us and would have allowed us to set out with an almost empty tank on a sea where to drift might well have been fatal. I had no doubt that the tins Colin had been carrying contained the fuel from the launch, and I was savagely delighted at the thought that he would have found his aircraft missing. Alison must have helped him to come by the petrol; she must have known of his presence on the island. But only that afternoon she had told me she thought it unlikely that he would ever visit Harbister again. Perhaps there was something in Charles' theory that here was a motive for the murder of Evadne. Alison knew something of that too; at least she knew that Evadne was dead and where she had been buried. It seemed very odd that her parents should not have mentioned that to Charles.

The shore line had begun to rise, and we drew closer in and into calmer water. Charles came back to sit beside me. The sound of the launch's engine was muffled by the near-by cliffs and steadied from a diffused buzz to a regular chugging. The great billows sank into modest undulations.

"Flett says H. K. Andersen disappeared about a year ago," said Charles. "He was out flying one day when a fog came down, and he was never seen again; no wreckage was found, though they searched for several days. He was a well-to-do young man living with his parents near Kirkwall; Harry says he thinks he had been

in South America until not long before he vanished. 'His plane would certainly have been recognized if ever it had landed on the mainland airfield. Colin was running a big risk in bringing it up to these parts again.'

"Flett never thought that Andersen might have landed on Harbister?"

"He said there was certainly no sign of it at the time of the disappearance; they looked on the airfield and in the hangars."

"But not over by Harbister Loch?"

"He thinks not; they never thought it possible to land there."

All sorts of wild theories went through my head: Colin might have had a second hide-out in the islands, and gone by the name of Andersen there. He might have been flying with Andersen and have landed the plane after its owner had baled out. Andersen might have been injured or killed in a crash-landing, and Colin appropriated the plane. The possibilities were infinite and all equally unlikely, given what I knew of Colin; I was beginning to magnify his cleverness to superhuman dimensions. The whole thing seemed too slipshod and careless to be a deliberate crime, and yet if the plane were honestly come by, why was there no record of any transaction?

Suppose the whole Evadne affair were a figment of Charles' imagination? I sighed and shivered—we were under the shadow of the cliff—and saw that we were only a hundred yards from Stack Head and its satellite chimneys. We would soon know now if Evadne had really been buried at Rousay.

Flett was an admirable pilot. I looked over the gunwale and could see that we were passing through channels sometimes no more than a few feet wide between submarine shelves of rock dimly visible beneath the

water. We rounded the outermost stack, and he shut off the engine and took up the boathook. The shadow of the enormous cliffs engulfed us, and the sudden silence when the engine stopped weighed down upon us, so that the mewing of the seabirds seemed weak and despairing and very far away. The shearwaters took flight as we approached and swept over us with a windy rush of wings, bombarding us with droppings. Perhaps I had been mistaken and the bulk in the sea was a dead sheep or debris thrown overboard from a passing ship. I pointed out to Charles where I had seen it and then turned my back on the proceedings, but my senses were frighteningly alert and the men's concentrated silence seemed unbreakable. The splash of the boathook as it probed beneath the bluff was the only sound that reached my consciousness, and when that too stopped I felt my skin crumple into gooseflesh. The boat gave a sudden lurch, there was a splash and a sucking sound and a shower of water sprayed over me as something landed in the prow with a wet and flabby thud.

"All right," said Charles' voice after a moment, shaky but cheerful. "You can look now. It's covered up."

I didn't accept the invitation. He pushed off with the boathook and poled along in the hidden rocks until we were round the stack; then Harry started the engine again and we set off on the return journey with our gruesome passenger.

"Is it Evadne?" I asked Charles when he came back to sit beside me.

"Can't possibly tell yet. But it's a body all right."

"What are we going to do with it?"

"I wish I knew. It's got to be somewhere safe, where Colin can't get at it. We'll take it back to Ham Farm and lock it up in one of Harry's outhouses."

"Has Harry got an outhouse which will lock?"

Charles thought for a moment. "No," he said at last. "I believe you're right—it isn't very likely. I don't suppose there's such a thing as a lock and key on the island. Harry will have to keep an eye on it."

"Harry's rather a friend of Colin's—and Alison even more so."

"What makes you think that?"

"I have my reasons," I said. "But I'll tell you them later."

"I think we'll take it along to the hangar."

The wind was behind us now, so I couldn't hear the conversation that went on, but I did not think from Harry's face that he liked the idea. He had set out on this expedition readily enough, but ever since the shipping of the body his face had been set and frowning, and now he began to expostulate. But Charles was firm, and he could have no valid reason for objecting, so at last he turned the boat's head towards the shore and we landed at the beach nearest to the airfield. There I left them to improvise a stretcher out of tarpaulin and made haste to get ahead of the grisly procession. I thought the only thing we could do now was to sit tight by the body until the arrival of the mailboat, and then hand it over to the captain, leaving it to him to deal with Colin if he thought there was sufficient justification. We had neither the legal nor the physical power to deal with the situation.

The fine weather had returned again, so I lit a fire on the sheltered side of the tower and went in for our food and cooking gear. The room had been untidy enough before, but now it was a shambles. My baggage had been tipped out of my bags on to the floor and left apparently untouched except where the intruder's foot had dragged a pair of stockings across the floor, but Charles' was flung in all directions as if the searcher had taken a furious satisfaction in scattering it. Someone

had seen us leave the camp and paid it a business visit in our absence.

I watched them carry the body into the nearby hangar; then Charles walked back a little way towards the sea with Harry. The determined cheerfulness of his manner when he returned told me that he had met with opposition.

"Had you anything of special interest in your pack?" I asked him.

"Why?"

"Colin apparently called and found us not at home."

"Hell!" said Charles, suddenly going white with anger. He disappeared into the tower and came back a few moments later looking suddenly tired and grim and listless. "What's missing?" I asked.

"The swine has got my gun."

The news threw a nasty cloud over our evening. As twilight advanced I think we both had an uncomfortable feeling that the firelight made us into a sitting target. The idea that Charles had been armed revived all my earlier uneasiness about him; I wondered again why I believed a word that he had told me, and how I could be certain that I was in fact pursuing a murderer rather than abetting one. I was a notoriously bad judge of character, or so my friends had always told me.

"We could have saved ourselves the trouble of landing Evadne," I said at last, breaking a gloomy silence. "All he has to do now is to keep us covered and walk away with her."

"I'm afraid it isn't Evadne. It's H. K. Andersen."

A FLAME leapt up among the driftwood of the fire by which we sat, and instinctively I put out a hand for the poker to beat it down. Our position seemed suddenly dangerous; there was no longer an uncertain crime and a clumsy criminal. There was a twelve-month-old death which had never been accounted for, and a man who had probably killed several times already possessed of the means of doing it again, and from a distance. I marvelled at the rashness with which Charles and I had interfered by salvaging the body.

"How do you know it's H. K. Andersen?" I asked.

"There was one of those little wartime identity discs on a chain on his wrist, with his name and number on it."

"Poor devil. I wonder where he fits into the picture."

"That's what we'll have to find out. It was evidently his body and not Evadne's that Colin was anxious to dispose of before I came up to investigate," said Charles. He sat staring at the fire and picking his teeth with a matchstalk. "He couldn't have been in the sea all that time, or he'd have been picked quite clean."

"Alison told me Evadne died and has been buried in the cemetery on Rousay."

"She never mentioned that to me."

"I thought possibly she might have neglected that. Perhaps she didn't want you to know she knew anything about it. Alison is up to the eyes in this business."

"Rubbish," said Charles sharply.

"Very well," I said in a huff, "She isn't—she's as pure as driven snow. I suppose you think I'm jealous of her beaux yeux and the fact that you appear to be in love with her. I assure you I'm heart-whole as far as you're concerned. And even if I weren't I wouldn't let it pull the wool over my eyes if it were a question of murder."

"Allow me to think I may know her a little better than you do, having lived in the same house for a fortnight."

I got up and left him, remembering the film in my camera. I went into the control tower, took out the film and developed it, and brought it out dripping to show it to him by the firelight.

"I'm not asking you to show any interest in the shearwaters. Have a look at the last snap."

"It's Colin," he said, holding it in front of the cycle lamp. "When did you take this? Today?"

"This morning, on the way back from Harbister. Do you notice what he's carrying?"

"Petrol cans, are they?" Charles switched out the lamp hastily at the sound of a rustle in the grass, and I saw he was as nervous as I was. After a moment he said: "I beg your pardon. I should have asked your reasons before I went off the handle about Alison."

"You see now why she was so anxious that we shouldn't take the boat out today."

"I can't believe she would have let us go knowing he had emptied the tank."

"It's not a very nice thought, certainly."

"Her own father," protested Charles, lest I should think his vanity had suffered.

"And her fond admirer—and admirers can't be any too common on Harbister."

"You are a thoroughly unscrupulous woman," he said,

poking the fire viciously. "You took that photograph because you were rightly afraid I wouldn't believe you about the petrol."

"Why shouldn't you?" I asked. "I didn't know then where he'd got it from."

"Ever since you met Alison you've had your knife into her. Why should she have known he'd taken it, any more than you? She may only have objected for the good reason she gave to our taking the boat out. It was a very nasty sea to be out in."

"Her mother made no fuss."

"Well, that doesn't make things any simpler." Charles saw that his position was untenable. "Say that Alison knows that Colin is on the island," he began from another angle. "She's a neighbour of his and a contemporary, so probably a friend. Say that she knows about Evadne's death—there's still no reason why she should suspect that it was unnatural."

"She also knows that he doesn't want his presence here known to us, and that he wants to get away quietly."

"That's an unjustifiable assumption."

"Then why did she tell me she didn't know when he would be here again, and that he didn't like Harbister, when she knew he was here all the time?"

"I don't know. She may be shielding him; perhaps he's told her some other story. Mind you, I still won't allow that she really knew he was around. But I'll go and see her tomorrow."

"Of course she may be right and you on the wrong tack altogether; perhaps Evadne *did* die from natural causes. I hope you'll be resolute enough when you see her; it looks as if Alison is our only chance of throwing some light on this."

"A slender one," said Charles thoughtfully.

"Oh, very. I'll agree she's got a lovely figure."

"I'm going to have a look at H.K.A." said Charles, goaded to sudden energy. "I wish he was nearer to us though I've no love of his company. I think I'll take that bracelet off, since it's all we have to identify him by."

"I wonder why Colin left it on."

"He never meant the body to be found, so it hardly mattered."

It was eerie sitting by the fire alone when he had gone, though three days ago I had not expected any company. But it was the company which had brought with it the macabre touch which oppressed me in my surroundings. My nerves were on the stretch; three days ago the cracking of a twig in the fire would not have made me start as it did now. Three days ago the sound of a shrill cry in the dark would have made me think of screech-owls, not of violence. When a distant scream sounded in the direction of the hangar I sprang up at once and listened, waiting. It had not been loud, and was not repeated. I set off at a run towards the shed.

Inside it I saw the tiny glow of the cycle lamp, and Charles bending over the body on the floor; he seemed to have heard nothing. He flashed the lamp towards me when he heard me coming, and then returned to his attempts to release the clasp of the bracelet, which was deeply rusted. I stood ten feet away and waited, not daring to interrupt to ask if he had heard the cry; his breathing was rapid and noisy, and the feverish clumsiness of his movements showed how he revolted from the task; but for myself, I couldn't believe the thing on the ground had ever been human.

At last he got it off and straightened up, shone the lamp for a moment on the head, then drew the tarpaulin over it and came towards me. He was scraping the rust from the metal disc, and the mask of repugnance was still on his face.

"Somebody cried out," I said. "Didn't you hear it?"

"Yes."

"Was it in the hangar?"

"Yes."

"I'll spare you the humiliation of telling me I was right about Alison. Didn't you find her investigating the body?"

"Yes, I did. She was trying to unfasten the bracelet."

"Did you speak to her?"

"No. She ran away when she heard me coming, and tripped over the groove for the doors; that was when she cried out."

His voice was even and enigmatic, and I resisted the temptation to press my advantage any further. I was suddenly sorry for Alison. Whether she had wanted it or not, she had been set upon a pedestal. Charles would never forgive anyone who disappointed him, and his heroines had to be above suspicion. A doubtful reputation to him was as offensive as guilt. Evadne had probably been a very ordinary and quite likeable young woman, seen through the wrong end of the romantic telescope. The Lord deliver us from all romantics, I thought, and gave quiet thanks for the deliverance of my own thoughts from the tyranny of that attraction which blinds the critical eye.

"Silly of her to run away," I said. "She might've known we'd follow it up tomorrow. I can't see why she wanted the bracelet. The body is still there, whoever it may be; though we don't know that it's the one he dug up."

"There's earth in the links of this bracelet, and the rust doesn't look like salt-water rust."

"Then stop scraping it off," I said in alarm. "We may need it."

"There's something inscribed on the back of the disc," he said, and set down his lamp on the floor. Crouching beside it, he took out a penknife and scraped away until the metal gleamed. "It's a name. It's Alison."

"Oh dear." I stopped, feeling suddenly breathless, for I saw where our speculations had been leading. Till then I had followed blindly with my nose to the ground each hint that had suggested Alison, without realising that I was following the spoor of another human being. Now I saw in a flash how the horrible series linked together. I had said that Alison was up to the eyes in it before I thought exactly what it was she was mixed up in. The finding of her name beneath the rust back to back with H. K. Andersen's seemed to couple her irresistibly to the crime.

Charles wrapped the bracelet in a handkerchief and put it in his pocket. He showed no signs of surprise. When I suggested food he shook his head morosely and lit a cigarette. I got myself some bread and cheese and sat down with it beside the fire. There was a heavy silence, and I could not help casting occasional furtive glances in his direction. Every time I did so I caught his eye, each time more sullen and resentful.

"For God's sake stop staring at me so anxiously," he burst out at last, and then said more quietly: "This is a horrible business. What are we going to do?"

"Alison's quite a common name in Scotland."

"It's hers all right, or she wouldn't have come to look for the bracelet. But what have they to do with each other. Were they lovers?"

"If they were, it's not likely she had anything to do with his death."

"But you swore she was in love with Colin."

"Oh God!" I said. "They couldn't have done him in between them!"

"You're still sure of it?"

"I don't know—yes, she must be. Or else he's black-mailing her to shield him."

"I'll go and see her tomorrow."

"You don't think we might get more out of her if I went—as one woman to another?"

"No I don't. I don't think she likes you."

"She hasn't shown any great confidence in you either."

"Perhaps we'd better try Harry."

"Or Mrs. Flett. I expect she'll know more about it."

Charles talked in his sleep that night, and I listened sadly. I heard no ill of myself, but I heard no good either; my vanity drew a blank. But Alison, it seemed, was certainly a *femme fatale*; I heard her name several times, and once with something like a sob. I thought of the casual way he had spoken of her to me and marvelled at the pointless hypocrisy of the man.

I suppose there are some rare women whom all men find desirable, and she was one of them; her beauty, less conspicuous than mere good looks by its very flawlessness, sprang from her lonely background of sea and space. She was one of those strange freaks of human nature which can only be explained by imagining them formed solely from their environment, for she seemed to draw nothing from the prosaic flesh of Harry and Margaret Flett. Except her candid, thoughtless eyes, and they were recognisably Margaret's, magnified and brightened. I comforted myself with the thought that the years would be no kinder to her than they had been to me, but it was Job's comfort. Youth seemed at that moment the only thing of value in the world; without it everything was dross—my freedom, my independence, my hard-won toughness. I would have given them all to have slept away the last twenty years of my life and

risen in the morning to compete with Alison on equal terms.

In the morning we set off again for Ham Farm. I had secretly decided on the points I wanted to clear up and determined to produce them if Charles tried to dodge them or to gloss them over; he was just as definite on what he did and did not want to know. "I'm not in the least interested in the degree of intimacy between them," he declared. "All I want to know is what sort of terms they were on at the time of his death. That's the only thing of any importance."

"Anything might be of importance," I said doggedly. "I want to know all they will tell us. Do they know why you came here?"

"No; they think I'm just up on a holiday."

"They don't know that Evadne was your wife?"

"Colin may have told Alison, if as you believe they are in communication. The others have no idea."

"They think she was Colin's wife, I suppose."

"I expect they took that for granted."

"We'll have to tell them the whole story."

"We'll tell them nothing," said Charles sharply. "We're going to ask them about H. K. Andersen—not to tell them anything. Is that clear?"

"You've made it quite clear what *you* are going to do. I shall reserve my judgment."

Charles stopped in his tracks and glowered at me, and I put out my tongue. "Put it in for God's sake," he said, shuddering. "You're at death's door, I should say by the colour of it. That gesture is properly confined to children, who have nice raspberry-coloured tongues to show for it."

"As it's not meant to be a nice gesture, it doesn't need a nice tongue."

It was plain that we were getting on each other's

nerves, and I decided to go carefully. But I also made up my mind to take Mrs. Flett into a quiet corner and tell her my side of the story unless Charles put all his cards on the table. She and Harry had the advantage of knowing all the protagonists in the story, and she seemed a placid, sensible woman.

THE Fletts had not been extravagantly pleased to see me on our first visit, and they showed no greater excitement when we went again. Once or twice that first time I had caught Mrs. Flett looking at me with a coldly critical eye, while Harry's principal mode of communication had been by winks and grins. No doubt they thought that there was only one reason why Charles should have abandoned their company for mine, and were reacting to it in the usual manner. I could not feel that their opinion was of any great importance—social codes could not be said to play any great part in life on Harbister—and I was inclined to feel flattered by this naive estimate of my attractions.

Harry Flett was up among the henhouses when we arrived, and we found Mrs. Flett standing thoughtfully in her kitchen amid tubs and buckets of soapy water and baskets full of newly-washed linen. Her husband had told her of our discovery at the foot of Stack Head, and she opened the subject at once.

"Fancy its being poor Kingsley Andersen—all that time in the water and turning up now as if the sea couldn't stomach him. It's like hearing him lost twice over to me, Mr. Charles; and yet I can't say but I'm glad it's not some other poor body."

"You knew him then, did you?" asked Charles.

"Oh, he was getting to be like a son to me," said Mrs. Flett. "And that's just what was in his mind at the time, you see. He was sweet on Alison when they were little more than children."

"Was Alison fond of him?" I asked.

Mrs. Flett turned a frigid eye upon me. "Alison's a good girl," she said distantly. "She was never one to run after the boys."

"I'm sure she wasn't. But you must have noticed if she was pleased to see him."

"She was and she wasn't. When she was little he used to come over with the mailboat—his father was the skipper—and she was always ready to meet him then. Later on she got coy and pretended she had no time for him. Maybe she thought he'd got too grand for her after he'd been away. He was always ready to talk about his farm in South America—*hacienda* he called it—and we liked to listen to him. Alison liked it well enough while he was there, and we all knew it was all talking at her, so that she'd know he'd made money. But after he'd gone she'd turn down her mouth and say he was an old windbag and she didn't believe a word of it."

"Did you believe it?" Charles asked.

"I'd never have thought to doubt it. And it was true enough," she added. "It was all written out in the paper when he was lost."

She went to a wooden letter-rack hung on the wall and produced from it a dog-eared newspaper cutting. A photograph headed a column of obituary notice, and I leaned curiously towards Charles to see it. H. K. Andersen had been a dark, sulky-looking man with a fleshy face and thinning hair, but his eyes were compelling. The paper regretted his disappearance, licked its lips over his considerable assets, and hypocritically condoled with the fortunate heirs.

"Looks a bit different now, doesn't he?" Mrs. Flett suggested, looking over my shoulder. I was shocked at the inhuman comparison, but when I looked up at her

I saw at once that no visual image like mine prompted it. She went out to call her husband, who could be heard clattering buckets in the yard. I read on down the enthusiastic column; H. K. Andersen, from being a shapeless nightmare, was puffed out into an eminently successful "local boy", a king of industry cut off in his prime.

"He would have been quite a catch," I said to Charles. "I bet they were wild with Alison for turning him down. Would you have liked her to go to South America?" I asked Mrs. Flett as she returned.

"It's a long way," she answered, "but there's nothing to keep the young folk. England or South America, it's all one to us."

Harry Flett came in and greeted me with a clumsy mock gallantry which offended me and most unjustly incensed Mrs. Flett against us both. He was a thick-set, bull-necked man with a complexion which sun and wind and dram-drinking had made turkey-red, the pores on his nose so large that the skin resembled pigskin, but the eyes under his bushy brows were blue and lively. Whenever he caught my eye he was wearing a knowing half smile, as if he expected my every word to be a witticism. Charles laid down the obituary.

"He seems to have left quite a comfortable fortune," he remarked. "None of it came to Alison?"

Harry Flett scowled. "No, bad luck to him," he said. "He was all talk, was Kingsley. But who told you he came after Alison?"

"Mrs. Flett has just told us he was hoping to be your son-in-law," I said.

"He'd had that idea for a long time, and we all thought well of it." I felt that his small, bright eyes were seeking mine, so I looked straight into them and said: "All except Alison?"

They flickered away. "She'd have come round to it in time."

"She didn't have time?" Charles asked.

"She had time enough," said Mrs. Flett. "But she seemed to like him less the more she saw of him."

"Ah, she's a spoilt baggage," said Harry angrily.

"And did she make it plain that she didn't like him, or did she flirt with him?"

"That she did not," said Mrs. Flett hotly. "She'd told him her mind often enough, but he wouldn't take no for an answer."

"Not from her—nor even from me," said Harry complacently.

"I never heard tell that *you* gave him no for an answer; it was you brought him back every time with your hawing. Though I was glad enough to see him myself," Mrs. Flett confessed. "Times we get tired of each other's faces between one mailboat and the next, and times the weather stops it sailing."

"I should think you do," I said. "No reflection on your faces of course but it must get very lonely."

"Two's company," said Flett fatuously, but eyeing me and not his wife.

"Kingsley came wet or fine almost, twice a week."

"It'd have taken more than my 'no' to keep him away."

"Poor Alison," I said involuntarily, and they both jumped on me at once. "Poor indeed," said Mrs. Flett indignantly, "and him taking all that trouble for her sake." Harry stared at me with such intensity that I grew uncomfortable.

"And what would you be meaning by that?" he asked.

"Sorry for her because she had no company but ours, eh? And hadn't sense enough to know which side her bread was buttered."

"You couldn't expect her to marry him if she didn't care for him," I said, and he turned aside with an impatient sniff of incredulity. But after a moment's side-long consideration of me he returned to the attack. "And I suppose *you* wouldn't have jumped at the chance of marrying five thousand a year, eh?" he demanded with the air of one who was calling my bluff. I laughed outright at his triumphant face.

"Not if it had a face like *that* attached to it," I said, pointing at the newspaper cutting. Harry seemed taken aback. He picked up the photo and examined it, and I believe he really began to have some doubts about the desirability of his own countenance, for he put up a finger and rubbed the side of his nose thoughtfully, and thereafter kept the conversation strictly to business.

"His plane was a 'Reliant', wasn't it?" Charles asked.

"Something like that it was called."

"Was he flying his own when he disappeared? Did he ever fly any other?"

"Sometimes he went up in a club one, but not very often. There was only two of them had their own planes—Clem Nicholls is still around in his. But I guess he was in his own; it's never been heard of since."

"Why d'you ask that?" demanded Mrs. Flett.

"Because Theresa and I found a plane on the cliff near Harbister. It isn't there now," Charles added hastily, seeing Harry lean forward in open-mouthed interest. "It was blown over the cliff edge in the storm."

"Whereabouts?" demanded the farmer abruptly.

"Beyond the loch, in the little dip in the hills, right on the edge of the cliff."

Harry's face was a study. "Had it crashed?" he asked.

"No, it had been landed there, and only a few nights ago. Theresa here saw it landing late at night the first night she spent here."

Neither the farmer nor his wife knew what to make of this statement. Mrs. Flett stared at Charles intently; her open-mouthed disbelief was patent. Harry's smile had quite vanished, his eyes were wide and his brows knitted, and he muttered an inaudible comment behind his hand.

"But he's been in the water a year," said Mrs. Flett at last.

"No, Mrs. Flett. I think he's only been in the water a week at the most."

She was silent, troubled. Harry had picked up the newspaper cutting again and was tearing it into pieces; I saw that his hands were shaking. The sweat had suddenly broken out on his brow.

"That's a lie," he said. "If he wasn't in the water, where was he?"

"Can you guess, Mr. Flett?" I asked, and Charles turned sharply to look at him. He stared at me savagely.

"Would I be asking if I could?"

"We thought that that was where you might be able to help us."

"Neither there nor anywhere, ye bold-faced piece." He half rose from his chair in his fury, but sank back again and racked his brain for words. "Think shame of yourself, coming here with your brazen face and setting traps for honest people. Hoping I could help ye, were ye?" he repeated, mimicking my voice in mincing tones. "I'll help ye both back where ye came from, and that as soon as ye like." He glanced at Charles, who was watching him with astonished alertness, and added more quietly: "And why would ye think I could help ye any other way?"

"There can't be much going on on this island without you knowing of it," I persisted, growing angry in my turn. "When Mr. Carmichael's away, do you have the key of Harbister House?"

"No."

"That's untrue, Harry," said Mrs. Flett, who seemed appeased by seeing us quarrel. "The young lady's in the right—tell her what she asks."

"It's in the drawer in the table, just by your hand."

"And has he another?"

He declined to answer. "No, he calls for it here," said Mrs. Flett. "Those old-fashioned mortice keys are too big to carry around."

"It has a yale lock as well?" asked Charles.

"Very likely, but we don't have the key."

Considering the remoteness of the island, Harbister House was well secured. I opened the drawer and looked among the miscellaneous objects in it. Harry evidently expected it to be there, for he made no movement to stop me, but he watched me closely. I saw no key of any description, but there was something which interested me more in the dust in a corner, and which I managed to abstract unnoticed; it was a shrivelled brownish seed.

"There's no key here," I said at last.

"Have you shifted it, Marg'et?" Harry asked his wife. Mrs. Flett shook her head.

I pulled the drawer out and put it on the table for them all to see, and Harry fumbled about among the cotton reels and old letters. He seemed perplexed and a little calmer, but not unduly worried. He got up at last and looked along the mantelshelf, then shook his head and sat down again, staring at me.

"Where is it?" he demanded.

"I think it's very likely that Mr. Carmichael has it."

"He brought it here when he left after Mrs. Carmichael died, and he hasn't been back since."

"When was that?" Charles asked.

"Last November."

"What did she die of? Do you know?"

"Dr. Finlay said it was diabetes," said Mrs. Flett. "He said it ought to have been diagnosed before. But there, they always say that when people die on their hands."

"Did you know Mrs. Carmichael well?"

"She was up here for some time, but we didn't see much of her."

"Did you know she was not married to Mr. Carmichael?"

Harry, who had been sitting with averted head drumming his fist on his knee, suddenly turned round and stared at Charles. Mrs. Flett pursed her lips and looked down at her clasped hands.

"We did hear," she said, "they'd put another name on the tombstone."

"She was my wife," said Charles.

To our astonishment the farmer gave a loud yell of ribald laughter. Charles did not move a muscle, but I was glad the table was between them. Mrs. Flett rose to her feet and stood staring at him, breathing heavily; her indignation was only speechless for a brief moment.

"For shame, Harry," she burst out. "Have ye no decency in you?" A deep flush suffused her weather-beaten cheeks, and her caution suddenly vanished. "D'ye think I didn't know before what went on between you?" she cried, "that you have to shame me now before the only company we've seen this summer? D'ye think because I never called you the liar you were I believed your fool tales 'about mending the roof at Harbister? You that couldn't put a roof on a pigsty, let alone fix one that'd keep the weather out for a man that'd been used to comfort like Mr. Carmichael? And d'ye think I didn't know the moment I saw the two of you together the way things'd be as soon as his back was

turned on ye," she added, warming to the topic. "Big, dirty, rutting beast that you always were—I was glad she was there to keep your hands off me."

Harry raised his huge bulk threateningly. "Shut up, will ye?" he said, shaking his fist under her nose. "I never said nothing, did I? Hold your whist."

"And now perhaps, since you know Harbister so well," said Charles, in a voice that made us all turn to look at him, "you'll tell us where Mr. Andersen was before he was dug up from there and thrown into the water last week?"

The farmer swung round on him, the fury driven out of his face. He looked like a man who suddenly realises that he is surrounded by enemies, and a dogged sullenness descended on him, but he did not lose his nerve. His eyes moved from Charles to me, and from me to his wife, and hastily from her to the table: "I'll thank ye to get out of here," he said with ominous restraint. "Ye can make what ye like out of what ye've heard, but ye'll get no more out of me, nor of Marg'et neither."

"I'll speak for myself, and thank you," said his wife.

"Speak for yourself, then, and tell them to get out of our house, mischief-making megrims that they are, making out to be so much better than ordinary folk."

I looked at Charles, who did not seem to have heard this altercation; he was staring at his hands which rested on the edge of the table, and while I watched he raised one of them to wipe the back of it wearily across his forehead. If Harry Flett had been able to answer his question, he would not have heard the reply. But I had a question of my own to put, and I knew that I should get no other chance if I missed this one.

"Tell me, Mr. Flett: would you say that Mrs. Carmichael was kept a prisoner on the island? She never came to you to ask for help?"

"No, never."

"Yes she did, Harry," contradicted Mrs. Flett in a trembling voice; she seemed suddenly to have changed her opinion of me and now turned towards me almost as a friend. "To tell you the truth, it's often worried me. She came over here late one night the day before we expected the mailboat, and asked if she could stay with us until it came. She said she was afraid of Mr. Carmichael; he'd been drinking. We didn't know what to say, I thinking she was his wife and we'd no right to harbour her, and him"—she threw a scornful glance at her husband—"him afraid she'd come to make trouble and tell me what I knew very well already. We were still haggling over it when Mr. Carmichael came. Then she jumped up and made out how glad she was to see him; there was quite a storm going on, and she let him know she'd come over to see us and hadn't dared to go back alone while it was on. And she went away quite gaily; we didn't know what to think."

"We thought she'd gone a bit daft," said Harry; he seemed very subdued. Mrs. Flett ignored him.

"But a week after that she was dead," she said, fixing me with a wide and fearful eye.

"I shouldn't worry, Mrs. Flett," I said, feeling suddenly terribly sorry for her. "I don't think you could have done anything for her. We're pretty sure that she was murdered."

"Murdered!" she repeated with a gasp, and sat down. I met Harry's eyes for a moment, and they seemed suddenly to have gone much wider and darker, dominating his face. Then Charles got up from the table and walked out of the door like a sleepwalker, and I went after him. He did not speak till we were out of sight of the house; then he took a deep breath and seemed to relax a little.

"That's better," he said. "Now I can breathe again, now we're out of that sty."

"I'm sorry for her; she seems a decent woman."

"She's all right—she's got him where she wants him now. She's been burning to say all that to him for years, and now she's said it. It's Alison I'm thinking of—where can she be today? Thank God she wasn't there, anyhow. What an atmosphere for her to live in!"

I too had begun to wonder where Alison was. I thought Harbister House the most probable place, but I did not like to suggest it.

"I'm afraid I'm trespassing," said Alison. "I wanted to speak to you."

She was sitting on Charles' pack, looking pale and frail and pathetic, when we returned to the tower. She looked at us both with anxious eyes, and took reassurance from our evident relief on seeing her.

"We wanted to see you," I said. "We hoped you'd be at Ham."

"I *was* there," she said. "I heard everything—or at least I heard a lot."

"Oh. Where were you?"

"Outside the door. I came up just as mother was getting started."

"Oh, then you didn't hear all of it," I said. "You missed all the talk about H. K. Andersen."

"You were looking for his braclet in the hangar last night?" asked Charles.

"Yes. I didn't want you to find it. I was afraid you would think I had given it to him. I never gave him anything," she said with vigour. "We were friends when we were children. His father was the skipper of the mailboat then, and he often came over with it. But I hated him when he began to make a nuisance of himself."

"When was that?"

"After he came back from South America. He went there just before the war."

"Bolted, I suppose?" asked Charles.

"Oh no, I don't think so. He went on business and

did pretty well there. He was interned there for part of the time, but it didn't seem to interfere with business. Kingsley would never let anything do that."

"Sounds a masterful sort of fellow," I said.

She nodded. "He thought so. The iron hand in the velvet glove."

"Like Mr. Callendar."

"Who was he?"

"My one-time boss in London. He'd take me out to dinner and dictate a letter in the taxi."

"I should like a job in London. How do I go about it?"

"You go up there and stand on a street corner," said Charles, "like the labourers in the vineyard."

"Alison, I know you don't need me to tell you that he's lying."

Alison shrugged her shoulders, and laughed and pouted, but I could see that she had only shelved the matter for the moment. There was a decisiveness about the line of her lips which showed she was not to be easily diverted from her purpose. And she must have had no small amount of character to have held out against H. K. Andersen's pertinacity.

Charles was evidently thinking the same thing, from a different angle.

"He must have been pretty insufferable for you to have turned him down," he remarked, "when there was so little alternative."

I saw Alison's eyes flicker towards Harbister and away again, but she made no reply.

"Aren't you rather jumping to conclusions?" I asked. "There may have been plenty of choice—Alison had many nearer neighbours than H.K.A."

"Why were you looking for me?" asked Alison, affecting indifference to the topic. She sat down beside

the fire Charles had lit, clasped her hands round her knees and stared into it. Though she was self-invited, she had no air of being at her ease. In fact, it was evident that she was nervous, less by anything in her attitude or expression than by a sort of electric tension that surrounded her. I felt sparks might fly out if I went too near her, and I wondered why she had come.

"Did you want to ask me questions?"

"I suppose we did," said Charles awkwardly. "Though I don't know what right we have to ask them."

"You were Evadne's husband, weren't you?"

"You heard that too?" asked Charles.

Alison looked suddenly up at him, lips parted and eyes wide; her hesitation was only for a second, and Charles was too entranced to notice it. I knew at once that she had heard it, not from his lips that morning, but from Colin's at some other time. But she nodded slowly.

"I was with her when she died," she said. "I think she poisoned herself."

"What makes you think that?"

"Will you be patient with me, please? And let me tell you in my own way?"

"Of course."

She tried to settle herself more comfortably, but it seemed difficult. I thought she was playing for time, and I became suddenly very much afraid for her. She seemed to take her deposition as seriously as if she were making it before her judges, and her anxiety was such that I soon felt equally convinced of our responsibility. Which made it so much worse to think, as I did after that tiny hesitation, that she was lying. It made her a strangely pathetic figure, as if she were deliberately invoking the whole penalty of perjury before God and man.

"They came over to the farm the first evening they were back here," she said at last, speaking clearly and

deliberately. "They generally did after the journey; we always had a meal ready for them. Mrs. Carmichael was very tired, and I thought she looked ill; she ate hardly anything. After supper Colin took out his cigarette case, and some little brown seeds fell out. He picked them up carefully and told us a story about them."

"We know the story," said Charles. "I was at school with Colin, and saw it happen."

"About the starlings and the berries? Apparently they're all right if they only eat the pulp, but the seeds kill them. Yes, well, the cat had just had kittens," said Alison inconsequently. She was speaking much more freely now, and I guessed that the coming part of her story at least was true. "They crushed a seed in some milk and gave it to one of them. It had convulsions, then it went quite stupid and died in half an hour. Evadne was very interested. She asked Colin all sorts of questions about his own illness, and then she said she thought it would be a very easy way to die. We were all quite troubled," she said softly, leaning forward as if addressing the fire, "to think she thought much about such things."

I could see that Charles too was troubled; this Mrs. Carmichael must have travelled far from the cockney exile who craved for nylons.

"Did she take any of the seeds?" he asked.

"Several of them fell on the floor; I know she picked up one, and she may have found more. I didn't see her return it to Colin."

We were silent, Alison still staring determinedly into the fire. Charles was thinking deeply, his face so grave that the cynical lines of his brow were smoothed away. From what he had told me of Evadne, I should have said that such an action on her part would have been quite out of character. People don't act out of character

without very good reason, but perhaps Evadne's troubles had indeed been great enough to disturb the balance of her mind, or perhaps Charles' judgment of her had been hopelessly biased. I guessed that this was very much what he was thinking, and it could not have been pleasant.

"Did she have a doctor?" I asked.

"She was dead when he arrived."

"It was very sudden, then?"

"Yes, very."

"Just like the kitten?"

"Just like the kitten," Alison repeated with a shiver.

"I did what I could," she added, leaning forward over her knees as if in pain.

Charles, who had left the questioning to me while he followed another train of thought, now spoke unexpectedly, clearing his throat first.

"Why did you go to nurse Evadne, rather than your mother?" he asked. "I should have thought your mother would have had more experience."

"Mother wouldn't go near her."

"And yet she made a meal for them in your house after their journey."

"She had to; Father insisted on that."

"You're quite sure about that? Do you actually remember hearing him mention the subject?"

Alison's brow wrinkled. "I think so," she said uncertainly. "I have a feeling I heard him speak about it."

"But you can't remember the actual words or the occasion?"

She held her brow in her hand and thought, then shook her head with a sigh. "No, I can't. But I know he would have done."

"Did Colin bring out his cigarette case before or after the meal?"

"After, I think; he always smokes after a meal. No,"

she contradicted herself suddenly, "I remember it was before, because Evadne said she would wait till after she had eaten. Why do you ask?"

Charles replied with another question. "Was the food on the table then? Is it possible that one of the seeds dropped on to her plate?"

"No, it wasn't. Mother went out a few minutes afterwards to bring it in."

"Did she bring it in on dishes, or on individual plates?"

"On plates," said Alison, "to save the washing up." She lifted her eyes suddenly to his face, and they were wide, dark and wrathful like the eyes of a sybil. "I see what you are getting at. It's impossible."

"What is?" asked Charles, gazing at her as if fascinated.

"That mother put some seeds in her food."

"It is," I corroborated promptly. "What about the starling? It was at Harbister."

Alison had risen to her knees, she turned her head slowly towards me. "Mrs. Carmichael's starling?" she asked in a voice scarcely above a whisper. "No, it was with us. She brought it in a cage to us before she went away, and she took it back to Harbister with her that same day. After she died I forgot about it; I haven't seen it since. Evadne did it herself," she added with a rising inflection of panic. "She did it herself—she must have done. No one else could have done it—it would be too awful."

"We found the starling," I said, not because I thought it important, but because I felt we had to change the subject. "It was dead in one of the hangars, run over by a plane."

"Talking of planes——" Charles seized on the topic with relief. "Do you know where Colin got his?"

"He hadn't one of his own; he hired one sometimes."

"Where from?"

"From Donnybristle, I believe."

"Without a pilot?"

"Oh no; there was always a pilot with it. But he could fly—he belonged to a club before the war."

She was certainly speaking the truth now, for she scarcely thought what she said; her mind was plainly preoccupied, and her restless staccato movements showed a rising agitation. She seemed on the point of adding something to the report of Colin's aerial activities, but changed her mind and said nothing. Charles seemed not to notice this; his reasoning had been brought up short by Colin's inexplicable possession of H. K. Andersen's plane. Even Alison, who he must surely see now had been in Carmichael's confidence, apparently knew nothing of that.

"H. K. Andersen died a year ago, didn't he?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Why was he buried at Harbister House?"

Alison rounded on me in a flash, and I imagined I felt the air crackle. "He wasn't buried at Harbister. He was lost at sea."

"Then who was buried at Harbister? There's an open grave in the back garden."

She jumped to her feet with a scream, startling us both by the catlike speed of the action, and stood pressing her hands to her cheeks while the tears rolled down them. "There isn't—there can't be. Why do you say that? What are you trying to get out of me—what do you want me to say? I don't understand."

"Never mind what we *want* you to say, Alison," Charles said gently. "Tell us the truth, or as much of it as you know."

"I have done—at least I've told you all I've seen. I'm not going to tell you my guesses. I don't know the

truth, any more than you do, and I don't want to—I'm afraid of it. Why don't you go away? What does it matter to you? Go away and leave us to sort things out for ourselves."

She stumbled away at a run in the direction of the farm, her sobs becoming less restrained as she ran; the wind brought the sound of them back to us, breathless and shrill.

"I begin to think she may be right," I said, "and that that's what we ought to do." Charles shrugged his shoulders.

"We haven't the option at present. And a lot can happen before Tuesday."

"Would you go if we could?"

"No," he said quietly. "I wouldn't leave Alison in it. But there's nothing to keep *you*."

"Except curiosity. On the face of it, now, I should say H.K.A. and Evadne were not killed by the same person, but it would be improbable, wouldn't it, that out of five people two should be murderers, whatever the provocation?"

"Highly improbable."

"What do you think of Alison's theory, that Evadne killed herself?"

Charles shook his head with conviction. "Nothing—she wouldn't. She'd kill Colin first."

"Wouldn't that be killing the goose that laid the golden egg?"

"Possibly. But even that kind of goose probably makes good eating."

"Did you ever find out the name of your tree in Devon?"

"Yes. It was the *Nux Vomica*, a source of a strychnine compound; it grows in hot countries, but it's surprising how many exotics live down there."

"I'm going to have a swim," I said. "I can always think better when I'm swimming."

"Mens salse in corpore salso."

"Do you always make bad puns when you're worried?"

"Yes, frequently. It's a sign of a rise in temperature."

I turned my back on the tower and walked with a feeling of deep relief away from human society towards the spacious sea. The sun shone in an unclouded sky and the sea basked beneath it, flashing with breakers, like an uncertain-tempered cat which purrs and lashes its tail. It was true that I found the leisurely movements of swimming conducive to what I called thought, which was partly a sensuous process. But I got little satisfaction from it today. We knew only what we had known before, that Evadne had been poisoned by one of five persons, and there was not a breath of a clue as to what kind of a fate had overtaken H. K. Andersen. All I was sure of was that it was not the one which history had assigned to him.

As I walked back I looked away to the east of the island where the blue sky was imperceptibly deepening, and I felt a melancholy craving to look down on the little holding on which, rather than on the desolate Harbister, this furtive drama seemed to be descending. It was hidden from me by a low sandy ridge, and I climbed it pensively and looked down on the farm. Mrs. Flett's washing still blew bravely out like ships' bunting, and some way below me, in a hollow in the gradual slope, Alison and Colin lay in each other's arms.

"Do you think she's telling the truth?" Charles asked me as soon as I returned. "How you can bathe in the sea after what we found in it yesterday beats me," he added, glancing almost superstitiously towards the hangar.

I had quite forgotten it until that moment. "But I didn't see it at such close quarters as you did," I pointed out. "And you were never fond of bathing. You are only making it an excuse for your laziness."

"I never felt it needed excusing," Charles answered absently. "Swimming is a most unnatural pastime—a return to the womb, I suppose the Freudians would say, a death-hunger."

"Physiologists might say it was a salt or magnesium hunger."

"I suppose they might. Myself, I'm a man of few appetites, but the sea doesn't seem to satisfy any of those." He gazed morosely on it. "Sometimes I feel quite nauseated by it, especially after yesterday. Great shining, slothful morass; I hate it."

"I adore it."

"Well, do you think Alison is telling the truth?"

"No, not always—or perhaps I should say not all of it."

"What right have you to say that?" he demanded truculently. "If she is lying she's a most consummate actress, because I've never seen a more convincing display of innocence. Just because she's young and lovely you therefore jump to the conclusion that she's deceitful—a

sure sign, my dear Theresa, that you are forgetting your own youth."

"I'm not your dear Theresa. And it may be that I remember it so clearly that I judge Alison accordingly. You asked my opinion, and I gave it you. But you might as well give up trying to get to the bottom of this affair; you're hopelessly biased."

Charles was apologetic. "All right," he said. "I know I asked your opinion, but you've no right to have such a decided one. There isn't any evidence to base it on, is there?"

I considered this. "She may have told us some of the truth," I repeated cautiously, "but not all of it."

"What makes you think that?"

"She went straight from us to Colin, I suppose because she had something to tell him. The fact that he was so close to our rather dangerous neighbourhood seems to me to suggest that he had expected her to find something here and take it to him. I wonder what she was doing here before we got back from the farm? Looking for the bracelet, perhaps; did you have it on you?"

"How near was he?" asked Charles. He brought the bracelet out of his pocket, spread it out on his knee and looked at it. "There must be something about it we haven't spotted yet. How near was he?" he repeated, looking up at me belligerently.

"About a quarter of a mile away. But this Flett complication, you know, rather upsets your case against Colin. A bad character isn't enough to condemn a man for murder, and if it were, old Harry would be in the running." I picked up the bracelet and began cautiously to clean up the disc; there appeared to be another inscription below Alison's name. "It's a date," I said, and spelt it out. "June 27th, 1951. How odd: isn't that the date he disappeared?"

Charles reached again into his pocket and brought out the torn scraps of the obituary notice which he had rescued from the table where Harry Flett had thrown it, and nodded. We looked at each other in perplexity.

"Something must have been arranged for that day—a wedding?"

"I can't think what else it could have been."

"As a trap to get him over here, perhaps?"

"Alison certainly didn't imply things had got to that point."

"No," said Charles reluctantly. "No, I'm afraid she's been disingenuous."

"Alison," I said doggedly, determined to exterminate his illusions, "is beginning to show in rather a ghastly light. She had a better motive than anyone for the murder of H.K.A., though it's not easy to see how she could have executed it."

"She could never have buried him and dug him up again without help; she could hardly have moved him alone."

"Perhaps she had help. Then she had a heaven-sent opportunity for disposing of Evadne, whose partner she had been in love with, probably for years. And she knew the method that was used for that purpose."

"So did all the others."

"Certainly. But only Alison was at Harbister."

"And Colin, I suppose."

"Yes, I suppose Colin was there; we must ask her."

"This H.K.A. must have been a very self-confident type," said Charles, taking the bracelet from me. "Engraving a date like that before the event strikes me as throwing down the glove to fortune. It's hardly likely he did it just to jog his memory."

"Perhaps he used it to jog Alison's."

"A form of suggestion, you mean, to wear down any opposition? Do you suppose there was opposition?"

"You heard what she said about him, that he made a nuisance of himself. And I tell you she's been in love with Colin for years."

"And I tell *you* I don't believe it."

"Because you don't want to. But if you go up the ridge there and look down towards Ham you'll have ocular proof of it, doubting Thomas."

"Oh," said Charles blankly. His features froze into a mask of numb misery; I had at last convinced him, and I felt ashamed of my brutality. I myself couldn't believe that Alison was guilty of the murder, but an unbiased assessment of the case against each of the five suspects seemed the only chance of getting at the truth, and every time we tried it we came up against his partiality.

"Though there are really six suspects," I added, continuing my train of thought aloud.

"Who is the sixth?" Charles asked, rousing himself.

"You."

"You don't say so. I suppose I came up here, having successfully got rid of my wife, expressly to rescue the unfortunate who had taken her over by murdering her. Having got here, I bumped off an innocuous South American business man, buried his corpse, dug it up again, accosted you like the ancient mariner to tell my incredible tale, and made every attempt to persuade you that everyone else on the island was guilty. I must say I don't see why your opinion should have been so vitally important."

"Neither do I, except that you might have thought it advisable to get your story on record before anyone else informed against you. You were here when I arrived, and I don't know how long you've been here. Just a minute," I added, as he opened his mouth to tell me. "Let me tell you some of the senseless things you've done that

might count against you. I happen to believe you did them out of thoughtless anger, but an unkind observer might say you have been busily destroying the evidence. First of all, you ate the bezoar, so that it is now beyond the reach of analysis. You pushed the aircraft over the cliff, containing the logbook, which might have been invaluable. It was you who produced the bracelet, the only proof we have that this body was H. K. Andersen's and not Evadne's. And you were carrying a gun."

Charles, who had been growing redder and redder with suppressed rage during this recital, surprisingly subsided without explosion. "So that's what you've been thinking," he said wonderingly. "No wonder you seemed a trifle distant once or twice. You've got quite a nice little argument there, haven't you, and beautifully worked out; you must have spent quite a lot of time on it. Still, there are several points where I can pick you up," he went on more calmly. "Harry Flett also saw the bracelet as soon as we took the body out of the boat; he tried to get hold of it. And if you have the nerve to examine the corpse at close quarters I think you'll find that it's indubitably a male and so could not possibly have been Evadne. If you think the logbook's really so important, I daresay I can get it back. It was in the aircraft pocket, and there's a chance it might still be on the rocks below the cliffs if I climbed down. But why did you think I'd done all this?"

"For Alison," I said. Charles smiled rather bitterly.

"I'm afraid you give me credit for a more romantic temperament than I possess."

"I'm rather relieved to hear it."

An embarrassing silence fell. I was glad I had spoken what I felt was as much of a bar to our inquiries as our different opinions of Alison, the fleeting suspicions of him which I had never quite been able to suppress. Even now

they took shape in the form of a deep uneasiness as to how he would receive them. But he seemed rather astonished than offended, and sat with knitted brows staring at his feet; evidently the idea had given him quite a new angle on our peculiar relationship.

"You really thought I might be the murderer?" he marvelled, running his hand through his hair.

"Once or twice I was almost certain of it, your actions seemed so very queer. And when you said your gun had gone I must say I was very uneasy. You did threaten Colin, you know, when you were at Harbister."

"Did I? I don't remember." The interlude seemed to have given him food for deep thought. A flash of panic lightened my mind; suppose I had really hit on the truth and naively confided it to him? In that case I was certainly sitting on a mine, and I had probably lit the fuse myself.

At last Charles lifted his head and sighed; there was a new anxiety on his rather worn face, but it was not violent. "When you come to examine it," he said quietly, "I haven't any alibi I can offer you, any more than any of the others have. I can only assure you that I didn't do it—and show you Evadne's letters," he added as an afterthought, drawing an envelope out of his pocket. He took two letters out of it and handed them to me. "Here they are—read them."

"It isn't necessary," I protested. "I was only trying to put things in another light."

"You succeeded admirably. Please read them—I insist."

I took them reluctantly. Evadne, I was surprised to find, had quite a lively descriptive style, and the story of her life at Harbister was a harrowing account of the torments of boredom. She never actually passed censure on Colin—to have done so would have been to acknow-

ledge herself badly in the wrong, and she hadn't yet come to that pass in the first letter. But she managed several little digs at him which had probably relieved her feelings even while she believed that they would pass unnoticed.

But the second letter was different. It was much shorter, and even the handwriting had changed; it was uneven and full of flourishes. It was recognisably the same as that of the other letter, but full of dashes, quotes and superfluous punctuation. And then I noticed the date.

"Twenty-seventh of June, 1951," I said. "She must have written it on the very day of Andersen's disappearance."

Charles looked at the envelope. "She must have got it wrong; this is stamped June 5th."

"Perhaps that's the envelope for the first letter."

"No, that was months before, in the New Year. Come to think of it, I got the second letter before the 27th. I was on holiday then in Wales."

"All these dots and dashes," I said. "Did she always write like this? It's not so noticeable in the other letter."

"Just trying to fill up the page, I expect."

"You never had any kind of a code between you?"

"No, no; Evadne didn't go in for high-brow games."

"It almost looks as if she were trying to convey something without putting it into words, about the 27th of June."

I handed the note back to him. Charles studied it from every angle. "Could it be the morse code?" he asked. "I believe she was a girl guide once."

He began carefully to copy out every punctuation mark in the order in which it occurred on the space at the bottom of the note. So arranged, with no indication of the endings of letters, it was like trying to read an early Greek inscription. But the addition of Evadne's liberal sprinkling of inverted commas gave the clue and the letter

gave up its belated message. The dots and dashes spelt out the laconic appeal: "S.O.S. Murder."

"My God!" said Charles. "And to think I never saw it!"

"It was a chance in a million that anyone would see it," I said, "if they hadn't been thinking about such things. The date meant nothing to you before you had seen the bracelet."

"I suppose Colin insisted on reading her letters."

"Lucky for her he didn't notice the date."

"That gives somebody other than Alison a very good motive for putting her out of the way. Evidently she knew all their plans for H.K.A. and didn't approve of them."

"The murderer could hardly let her leave the island alive after that."

"If a marriage had been arranged," I said, "Mrs. Flett would know about it. I'll go and see her." I had been looking for an excuse to go and see Mrs. Flett alone; her natural hostility against Evadne and refusal to help her during her last illness told against her. She had sounded friendly enough towards H.K.A., but she had never mentioned that a marriage had been mooted, which seemed rather strange considering how decidedly she had declared that Alison did not flirt with him, and how ready she had appeared to co-opt him into the family.

So the next morning I returned to the farm, taking the bracelet with me. There was a stiff wind blowing from the south east as I struggled up the ridge and came in sight of Ham Farm. The view was as calm and bleakly beautiful as ever, but for once I was unmoved by it. I could think of nothing but the cryptic message Charles had translated beneath Evadne's desperate scrawl; I repeated it over and over to myself like a slogan as I walked: "S.O.S. Murder—S.O.S. Murder," till I could almost persuade myself I had heard it spoken. Not that there was anything new in the idea; I had been living with it since Charles' first recital of his story. But there was something freshly shocking in the sight of it written beneath that flourishing, affected-seeming note. I could imagine how natural it would be to Charles to stuff it away after a hasty reading, with no feeling but irritation. And so, because in her desperation she did not succeed in revealing a new side of her character, but only an accentua-

tion of the old familiar foibles, H. K. Andersen had died and eventually Evadne herself had died too.

My feelings of bitter indignation at the ironic failure of her attempt and the grim hopelessness of her position made me think of all the Fletts with an intolerant dislike. One of them perhaps was a murderer, and the others were crassly, criminally stupid, if they were not accomplices. It seemed impossible that two people should be killed out of so close and confined a circle and the others not know that they had met their deaths by violence. It made the whole shining sunlit world seem threateningly insecure and hypocritically bright.

Harry Flett was out in a dinghy in the bay, rowing along close inshore towards the lobster pots he sank among the flat rocks on the point. Mrs. Flett was busy about the house. There was no sign of Alison.

Mrs. Flett was not pleased to see me. My mind was full of Evadne at that moment, or I should have remembered the scene which had been called forth at our last visit and realised that I could not expect much of a welcome. It must have been painful to her to exhibit their troubles before strangers. But I doubt if there would have been much rapport between us at any time; she was too much the type of the secure domesticated woman with no interests outside her family—she could never have regarded me as anything but a potential cuckoo in the nest. She greeted me rather distantly and went on with her cooking. I stood in the kitchen doorway wondering how to begin.

"What does Alison do with herself all day?" I asked at last. "She never seems to be at home. Does she go out fishing with Mr. Flett?"

"Sometimes," she said laconically.

"She's not with him this morning, is she? I saw him from the top of the hill."

She gave me a tight-lipped glance that suggested I saw far too much, and made me more nervous than ever of showing any interest in the family affairs. The fleeting suggestion passed across my mind that perhaps I had after all no right to interfere; the deaths were ancient history, and the murderer might find no further occasion for the exercise of his diabolical talent.

"You'll maybe find her up on the cliffs somewhere," Mrs. Flett said at last reluctantly. "She's always wandering to no purpose."

"It was you I really came to see," I said rather lamely. "I wondered if you knew anything about this." And I showed her the bracelet in the palm of my hand.

"Yes, I know it," she said, after a swift, casual glance. "I suppose it was on his arm?"

"Yes. It has Alison's name engraved on one side, and a date—the date on which he disappeared."

"Ah," she said with a wry smile. "I noted ye'd taken the paper."

She was clever, Mrs. Flett, for all her narrowness, and she looked at me with a greater tolerance, having displayed her sharpness. I liked her; the atmosphere grew warmer.

"It's a funny thing, but he used to tease Alison they were going to be married on that day. She hated it—she'd shut her eyes and stop her ears as soon as he spoke of it to her or pointed to that. And that was the day he was lost." She picked up the chain and looked at it sadly.

"That was very strange," I said. "What did Alison say about it?"

"She didn't say much, but I'm inclined to think she thought it was a judgment on him. She took it too seriously—he was only gaming."

"Nothing was definitely arranged for that day, then?"

"Dear no, she wouldn't hear of it."

"But he came over to the island then?"

"Yes; he was flying back from here when he met his crash."

"You heard the plane leave the island, I suppose?"

I was going too fast for her; Mrs. Flett put down her rolling pin and looked me severely in the eye. "I saw him off from this door," she said, "and I thought no more about it—he was quite able to look after himself. We most of us are in these parts," she added pointedly. "We mind our own affairs and we like other folk to do the same."

"I know you think I'm interfering, but this date on the bracelet seems so very strange. Is it a custom in these parts?"

"No, but seafaring men sometimes do such things."

"The same idea as tattooing, I suppose. How did Alison receive him on that day? Did she realise then that it was only a game?"

"She never came home all day," she answered, "but went skulking off on the hills. It was after dark, and he'd been gone several hours, when she came in."

"So that probably she never heard the aircraft leave, or she would have come home sooner?"

"I don't know whether she did or not, and I can't see where you're driving."

"It's just this, Mrs. Flett: I'm wondering whether H. K. Andersen really did leave the island, or whether he was murdered by the same person who killed Mrs. Carmichael."

"Murder again!" she exclaimed, her eyes opening wider even while she scoffed. "Why, ye're plain silly about it. Who could have murdered them? There was none but us all on the island."

"That is; your own family, Mr. Andersen and Mr. and Mrs. Carmichael."

"That's all."

"And none of you, of course, had any special reason to dislike Mr. Andersen. No, it's not feasible. But I wonder how Mr. Carmichael got hold of Andersen's aeroplane."

"He didn't; he hired one to come up here, and it went away the next day." She produced this information with a satisfied air as if it settled the question once and for all, and I could see she was really irritated when I refused to be crushed.

"Someone came up in it last week, though; we found Andersen's logbook in the plane."

"And where is it now?"

"Still in the plane, at the bottom of the sea."

Mrs. Flett did not look at me as she thrust her pie into the oven and piled up the dishes. When she spoke her voice was quieter and less assured than before, and her hands were restless.

"That's about the best place it could be in, I think, and it's maybe a pity you took so much trouble to pull his miserable body out. When a thing's done and can't be undone it's best let alone."

"Is that what you honestly advise me to do, Mrs. Flett? But this looks like a double killing, and you know troubles always come in threes. Shouldn't I—and you too, for that matter—be accomplices in the next one if we did nothing about it?"

"Ye've a bee in your bonnet, and ye'll not fool me with superstitious truck. I doubt if Mr. Carmichael will come up here again," she added. "He's trying to sell the House."

"Who to?"

"To the only person he's able to sell it to—his cousin that gets it after he's dead."

"Whether it's here or anywhere else makes no

difference," I said. "That's a very selfish way of looking at it."

"And what if it is? If you don't look after your own no one else will. But it's all rubbish," she said tartly. "Mr. Carmichael's no more a murderer than you are." And she looked at me under her brows to see whether I had appreciated this hint at my own unknown and possibly dubious character.

This was plainly my cue to be gone, but I did not take it. She picked up her pastryboard and dusted it industriously, then turned to begin washing up her crocks, her back to me. This had the opposite effect to the snubbing one she had intended; I grew bolder when I couldn't see her face.

"Was Mr. Andersen a friend of Mrs. Carmichael's as well as of your family?"

"That I don't know; but it wasn't her fault if he wasn't."

"I suppose he knew nothing of your husband's relationship with her?"

I asked the question with great trepidation, but to my surprise and relief, instead of flinging the basinful of water in my face as I had half expected her to do, she crumpled over the bowl and began to weep silently into it.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Flett," I said helplessly. "I never intended to upset you. It's just that I feel we're all in a dangerous position—especially Alison."

"Alison?" she repeated, drying her hands on her apron. "What's Alison got to do with it?"

"I'm afraid she's very fond of Mr. Carmichael."

"Has she told you so?"

"Not in so many words."

She threw me a glance of surprise at my acuteness, pulled a chair up to the table and sat down on it with a

sigh of exhaustion. "Yes, he did know about it," she admitted, staring out of the little window, her sad eyes seeming paler in the sunlight. "We see so few people here, you see, and he was a kindly man, and interested in us all. I thought he was wise, too, for a young man; living away so long in a far country seemed to have ripened him. So he came in one day and found me crying, and got it all out of me, and very understanding he was; he said should he speak to my husband about it and I said no, better leave it alone; Harry's a violent man and I thought he might take against having him for Alison."

"And he never did say anything to Harry?"

"I don't know; I've sometimes thought perhaps he did. Harry seemed less restless for a bit, and I sometimes caught him looking at me thoughtfully. And then Kingsley was killed, and Mr. and Mrs. Carmichael went south. And to think young Charles was her proper husband all that time!" she exclaimed, with a return to self-possession accompanying her indignation. "She was a wicked one and no mistake."

"Yes, I suppose she was, but she certainly paid for it."

On my way back to the airfield I went round by the sea side of the hen-house, instead of returning over the hill, and at the neck of the headland I met Harry returning with two lobsters which he waved at me playfully. He was quite skittish, as we were out of sight of the house, and even attempted to put his arm—the one without the lobsters in it—around my waist. As I dodged it I dropped the bracelet, and stooping to pick it up, I felt from his sudden stillness that the sight of it had roused his suspicions.

"What are you doing with that?" he asked as I straightened up. Looking into his eyes, I noticed that the pupils, which a moment ago had struck me by

their size and the darkness they gave to his blue eyes, had shrunk to pin-points. I put the bracelet into my pocket.

"You recognize it? It was on the body. It had Alison's name engraved on the back of it, so I came to see if she would like it."

"Give it to me," he said, holding out his hand. "I'll give it her."

"Oh, I met her going out just as I got to the house. She doesn't want it. I think I'd better keep it and give it to the coroner—I suppose there'll be an inquest on him."

"I dare say," Harry assented, frowning, seeming not to know what to do. Then he nodded to me distantly and went on to the farm.

I wondered what had been the real state of relations between Harry and H.K.A. They could not have been very affectionate if H.K.A. had shown that he knew of the farmer's entanglement with Evadne. In fact it was a piece of information which he could very well have made use of if he had been unscrupulous, if he had not revealed the source of his knowledge, and if Harry had been a promising subject for blackmail. It was possible that Harry had a long stocking, but not likely, for they lived comfortably enough. His launch alone represented quite a substantial capital outlay. H.K.A. was certainly much the wealthier man of the two.

But if Harry was no plutocrat, he had something which H.K.A. wanted very badly—like Jephthah, judge of Israel, he had a daughter. It was unlikely that anything had passed between them in writing; Harry seemed fond of his wife, and probably a hint of a threat to tell her of his philandering would have been enough to make him promise to bring pressure to bear on Alison—pressure which had not been successful. He was between the devil of H. K.

Andersen's knowledge and the deep blue sea of his daughter's obstinacy.

But it would have been nicer to have found something in black and white. The processes of reasoning are, after all, so dangerously fallacious. The most perfect argument could be turned inside out by the disclosure of an extra bit of evidence or the wrong interpretation of a character. And about H.K.A.'s character both Charles and I were wholly in the dark. H.K.A. was the missing link; our knowledge of him was a kaleidoscopic pattern of scraps gleaned from his acquaintances on the island, none of them intimates of his. I yearned for something tangible connected with him, even so uncommunicative a thing as the aircraft logbook. I would have given a lot to know in what frame of mind he had left home on that fateful day of June 27th, and whether he had started out with a white carnation in his buttonhole or a knuckle-duster in his pocket.

There was no sign of Charles when I got back to the tower, so I went for my usual swim, and then came back to cook an unusually elaborate meal, in which way I expressed my satisfaction at my discoveries about the bracelet and H.K.A. The evidence now all seemed to suggest a quarrel between Harry and H.K.A.; we had but to see Alison and ask her whether her father had warmly pressed the question of marriage with Andersen. I waited impatiently for Charles' return; he had left no note to suggest a prolonged absence.

The day wore on, seeming the longest day of all my stay on the island. I wondered whether he had gone to try and salvage the logbook from the wrecked aircraft, and as time passed I grew fearful that he might have tried to climb down the cliffs and slipped on to the sullen rocks below. I debated whether to go over to Harbister to look for him, but the place depressed me and I lingered, hoping

he would appear, until it grew too late to get there before dark. Then I sat by the fire lamenting my stupid indecision until at last, long after midnight, darkness came.

The loneliness appalled me. It had quite a different quality from the loneliness of my first night on the island. Then, the sound of the sea had soothed me and I had listened only to that; the countless other ticks and rustles of the summer night had never reached me. Now I took the song of the sea for granted and I was listening sharply for other sounds, of footsteps or stealthier movements, perhaps Charles', perhaps the murderer's. Fortunately for my misery, complete darkness was scarcely more than a passing shadow, a long eclipse. Then the sky began again to lighten and I gave up my attempt at sleep and prepared to make a search.

BRILLIANT sunshine and a sea that was calmer than I had yet seen it. The scene seemed to have been growing milder and less dramatic while events on Harbister became more complex. Not a shadow on its sparkling surface suggested tragedy or seemed in a key with Charles' unexpected and terrifying disappearance.

I told myself I was imagining absurdities, and remembered the scorn he had poured on my referring to our battered concrete shelter as "home". It had not the pull for him that it had for me; there was no imperative reason why he should have returned to it. To him, Ham Farm was the natural focus of activities, and the tower only a useful but unattractive economy. Ham Farm--not Harbister: with the coming of daylight I abandoned the idea of a search of the cliffs where the aircraft had gone over. Charles had not had the same conviction of the importance of the aircraft logbook. For him the centre of events was always Ham, for Ham was Alison's home; I was sure he must be there, or in its neighbourhood. Perhaps I had missed him by returning along the shore, and he had gone there over the hills and spent the night there. As soon as this thought occurred to me I was sure it must be just what had happened, and I was filled with devout relief. I wished I had thought of it during the dark so that I might have had some sleep.

But though I clung to it as I descended towards Ham Farm, I was almost afraid to put it to the test. What should I do if he were not there, and had not been seen

there? Then I should go to Harbister, for then there would be no chance of a happy ending; Harbister House seemed to hold in its bleak hollow a poisonous miasma which was fatal to all strangers. Only Colin continued to survive there, an amphibian who could live in any atmosphere. Colin at home in Harbister seemed to my confused imagination a different and far more sinister figure than the weak, weary, perplexed creature I had seen on the hillside.

But the idea of harm overtaking Charles seemed too incongruous. My suspicions of him, I knew now, had never been more than intellectual ones; my hunch had always been that he was trustworthy, and anyone who will not trust a hunch in preference to reason does not deserve either. Along the trail of death which we had uncovered Charles had seen the antithesis of the horror and had somehow succeeded in annulling it by his own vitality; I felt that if anything had happened to him the whole weight of it would come down on me and crush me. I should never have the strength to escape it alone, much less to track it to its source as we had both intended.

There were other more egotistic fears: if he were dead, my own chances of escaping alive were small. There were two days and two nights to pass before the mailboat came, during which I should be the object of the murderer's undivided attention. I was already looking to the mailboat as to a sanctuary; it filled my imagination like a veritable dreamboat, remote and glittering. But if I survived to see it, its arrival might well be used as a trap in which to catch me as I went to meet it.

The sight of Mrs. Flett tranquilly feeding her pigs jolted me out of this nightmare. Early as it was, Harry was already out among the hen-houses. She looked at me in mild surprise at my early appearance, but evidently without a thought of disaster.

"Is Charles here?" I asked.

She looked as surprised as if he had never been a guest there.

"Here? No—how should he be? He left to go back to his bed late last night."

"He never got there," I said breathlessly. "Are you sure he's not in his old room?"

"Quite sure," she answered. "You can look for yourself—there it is."

I went towards the door she indicated and pushed it open, prepared for anything. I was half expecting to see Charles' body, dead or sleeping, lying on the bed. But the bedstead was stripped and the bed-spring propped against the wall. I spied around to see if there was anything which could have been interpreted as a message, but I drew a blank. The stale air, slightly scented by the cake of dried soap on the washstand, had been undisturbed for some time.

I was bewildered. For a moment I forgot where I was and what I was looking for. Absurdly, I opened drawers and a cupboard, and the unfamiliar things I saw there increased my confusion. As I had sometimes done at Mr. Callendar's office when I was tired and thinking longingly of a holiday, I went on searching mechanically while my thoughts wandered. A nameless anxiety kept them in a minor key, but by and by I was convinced that I was back in the neat and dingy room looking for some paper which he or I had mislaid.

Soon, I thought, I would cease to believe in Charles' existence. And suppose they had come to an agreement between them that he should cease to exist, who would believe me that he had ever done so? I had the horrible conviction that they were all my enemies, that even Charles was deliberately hiding from me and secretly mocking me, that one has in evil dreams.

"Whatever are you doing?" asked an unexpected voice. "Are you coming to board with us? You don't need to worry about the things in the cupboards—we will empty them if you do." Alison stood in the doorway, looking at me with an air of mild curiosity and amusement. It was no doubt aroused by the thought that the discomforts of our primitive camp had got the better of me, but I jumped at once to the conclusion that she was one of the conspirators.

"This is ridiculous," I said haughtily. "Where can he have got to? And why does he have to disappear without leaving any word? I suppose it is none of my business, but if anything *did* happen to him and I had just sat by and twiddled my thumbs, I should look pretty shabby."

"Who has disappeared? And what could have happened to him?"

"Charles has. And to judge by precedent," I said, angered by her serenity, "quite a lot could have happened to him. He could have been poisoned, drowned or pushed over a cliff, to name a few of the things that might have happened." I was fully awake to the situation now.

"You're fantastic," said Alison. "Who would do such things to him?"

"Somebody on this island appears to make quite a habit of it."

She frowned. "I think mother's right," she said, "and you *have* got a bee in your bonnet." She pursed her lips in distaste. "You have no right to go about insinuating all sorts of frightful things. Charles is not obliged to be at your beck and call and to explain all his actions to you, is he?"

"No, but Alison—" I heard my voice take on an imploring note—"you don't understand. This is no bee in *my* bonnet. It was Charles who told me that Evadne's

death was not natural. He knows far more about it than I do, only he is more discreet. He really is in danger, that's why it's so strange that he hasn't appeared. What time did he leave here last night?"

"About half past ten."

"Did you see him off?"

"No, but I heard them go. They had been drinking. Father went out with him to put him on the road."

"What time did he come back?"

"About twenty minutes later."

My immediate thought was that in that case Charles could not be far from the farm, but I didn't say so to Alison. I would have liked to ask to see the glasses they had used, but I knew that that would be taken as a further obstinate demonstration that the bee was still buzzing, and would bring me up against the family solidarity. And it was vanity to think that the dregs would have conveyed anything to me; I shouldn't have been able to recognize any adulteration. While these ideas passed through my mind Alison was watching me thoughtfully, her conviction apparently a little shaken by my insistence. Suddenly she turned on her heel and went out and towards the door of the kitchen. I followed her. She crossed to the table on which the dishes were stacked waiting to be washed, picked up one of the glasses which still stood there, smelt it and drew back in disgust.

"Uph!" she said. "It smells raw—and bad."

I lifted the other glass and sniffed it cautiously. I didn't think there was anything unusual about it—it smelt only faintly of whisky, but it appeared to have been rinsed; the drops in the bottom of it were of water, not whisky.

Alison had gone very green. She broke off a lump of bread and nibbled it. "It's the stuff he made at the end

of the season, after the storms," she said. "Mother told him he ought to throw it away. Who'd have thought he'd be fool enough to drink that, and less than a year after it'd been put in the bottle. Charles is probably sleeping it off somewhere. I'll come and help you look for him."

This rational explanation lifted a great load from my mind. It was so simple that I was inclined for a moment to take the Flett view of my preoccupation with violence and to think I had a morbid leaning to unnatural explanations. It was quite understandable that a hardened stomach like Harry's should have withstood a draught which might well have knocked Charles out. I had heard of the poisonous effects of whisky made from rotten grain, and though I had heard too that it could be fatal, the greater part of my anxiety was at once relieved. I was obliged to conclude that this greater part had been due more to concern over my own possible fate than to apprehension about Charles. For Charles could as easily die from the accidental effect of rotten whisky as from the deliberately administered one of poisoned seeds or any of the other methods of disposal I had listed to Alison. Only I could no longer believe him dead.

"I'm afraid you must think me an interfering old hag," I said apologetically. I was feeling rather sheepish, and Alison's murmured and not very emphatic denial did not relieve me. "I don't think he will be over the ridge," I remarked as we started out across the yard. "I came that way this morning and saw no signs of him."

Alison demurred. "It was nearly dusk when he left; I shouldn't have thought he'd go along by the shore."

"Should one of us go one way and one the other?"

"I think we'd better stick together; we may have to carry him home."

We went at last towards the shore. There were so

many questions I had wanted to ask Alison that now that we were alone together I hardly knew where to start. And they were all rather delicate ones: I particularly wanted to know where Colin had been during Evadne's illness. Then Alison played into my hands by herself bringing up the subject of Evadne's death.

"I suppose Mr. Pomfret knew Mrs. Carmichael was ill when she and Colin came up last November?" she asked. "I know Colin wrote to him; it seems odd that he didn't come up before."

"I don't think he received any letter; he thought they were in Devon. I'm sure he didn't know she was ill—he knew she was afraid."

"Afraid of what?"

"Of Mr. Carmichael's temper. He had been drinking a lot."

Alison gave me a sidelong glance—a sharp, severe one.

"How did he know that?" she asked.

"He had had letters from Evadne. I know that's true," I added. "I've seen them."

"I don't believe it," said Alison. "Colin was always very good to her."

"Your mother told me last night that she came to Ham once with the same story."

"She may have done; she was a hopeless liar."

"But Alison," I protested, "why should she have lied about that? She'd left Charles for Carmichael, so she must have liked him once. Something had turned her against him."

"It was the place that did that; she was dreadfully bored here, and always wanting to get away, but she had no money."

"How you hate her!" I said wonderingly. "Even though she's dead."

Alison flushed. "Because she can still do harm."

"In what way?"

"That letter you say you've seen—there may be others. She was a mischievous woman."

"Was Mr. Carmichael at Harbister when she died?"

"Yes, he was there. So was I, and so was my father," she added, with a triumphant faith in the safety of numbers.

"Mr. Flett? What was he doing there?"

"He came over several times while she was ill, to bring her some fish or a chicken. She did it herself," she repeated firmly. "All these lies about Colin drinking and her being afraid of him were to make people think he'd killed her. He was tired of her, and she knew it; she killed herself, when she'd made it look as if he'd done it."

It was news to me that Harry had been there at the time of Evadne's death, and it fitted in well enough with the trend of Mrs. Flett's disclosures. If Harry, or perhaps Harry and Colin together, had plotted to kill H. K. Andersen and Evadne had come to know of it, the second murder would follow inevitably from the first, and both men had had the opportunity. If they were in collusion, then each must be suspicious of the other. If one was innocent of the deaths and had no suspicions, then Charles, who had many, was in the greatest danger.

"What makes you think Colin was tired of her?" I asked. "I thought you said he was always good to her."

"He was—but he wasn't in love with her."

"You seem very sure of that," I said. "But some people have funny ways of showing their affection, and some don't seem to have any ways at all. It's not easy to tell."

"He was in love with *me*," she said defiantly.

Now I felt that I was really getting to the root of things, but they were vastly more complex than we had

suspected. I was almost afraid to say any more, for fear Alison should realise how much she was adding to my stock of information. But after all she had nothing to fear, for we had no witness; and there were so many things I had still to find out.

"What were you going to say about the plane, the other day when Charles asked you about it?"

Now Alison hesitated. We had reached the sand-dunes which fringed the shore in the centre of the bay, and she scanned the beach in silence. Then she seemed suddenly to make up her mind.

"I may as well tell you that," she said, with a touch of bitterness. "It was I who found the plane, not Colin. I never knew what happened to Kingsley, but I knew he hadn't crashed in the plane. I found it in one of the big nissen huts on the edge of the airfield, quite a long time after the search had been given up."

"Why didn't you tell the authorities?"

"We wanted it. Colin and I took it over to Harbister and hid it in the place where you found it, and covered it up with gorse bushes so that it shouldn't be seen from the sea. We meant to go away in it, as soon as he had sold the House."

"Without telling your parents?"

"Yes; Colin wouldn't let me. You see, we knew there was some mystery about the plane's being there."

I thought it wiser not to ask if she had considered the implications of the presence of the plane; Colin had evidently drawn some conclusions from it. So that I shouldn't seem to be putting any emphasis upon it, I pointed towards the rocks on the headland.

"The tide must come over there pretty quickly when it starts; it acts like a breakwater."

"Yes; there are one or two pools which make a sort of dam; I expect it's quite a depth on the other side

already.” She turned to look over the sand dunes around us, and shook her head despondently. “We’ve got our work cut out; he may be lying in any one of those hollows.”

Some instinct turned me first towards the headland. I suppose it was the bee in my bonnet which continued to buzz that none of this was as accidental as it seemed, that everything was carefully planned to look like chance—and so Charles would be lying in the most dangerous spot. The sea had just rounded the outermost rocks, and the pools among them were already filling. The headland was a tilted outcrop of rock like a model of the island itself, split and riven in many places and covered with slippery wrack. Certainly no drunken man could have walked far along it, but coming across the sand when the tide was out, he might very well have walked into it and fallen down beside it. If he had been carefully set on the wrong road at the edge of the sand, that was what would have happened. And as I ran out along the edge of the rock towards the water I could see a set of wavering footmarks coming at an angle towards it.

And that was just what had happened. When I found him Charles was lying in several inches of seawater with his shoulders propped against the rock, deeply, drunkenly, stuporously asleep. I couldn’t rouse him. I called to Alison, who came open-mouthed but silent, and between us we half dragged, half carried him back on to the sandhills. Within ten minutes the sea had covered the rock against which he had been leaning.

For several minutes we did all we could to rouse him. We pinched, shook, prodded and splashed his face with sea-water. At this he stirred a little, opened bleary eyes and stared at me. Then a foolish smile spread over his face as his eyelids dropped again; he murmured "Good old Theresa" and once again fell sound asleep.

"I'll get father," said Alison, "and we'll take him back to the farm."

"You'll do nothing of the sort."

She stopped in her tracks and gazed at me, and I straightened up and stared ferociously back. I forgot for the moment that she was little more than a child. I had been expecting and dreading that suggestion, and her making it now seemed to me to prove that she was in alliance with them all against Charles and me. I hated and feared her, yet I was shocked and perplexed by the astonishment and resentment in her face.

"What d'you mean?" she asked, her brows drawn down over wide, indignant eyes. "You surely don't think we'd harm him?"

"You didn't do him much good last night, did you?"

"You can't think that that was done deliberately. People who can't hold their liquor shouldn't drink," she added haughtily.

"Don't quote your sophisticated wartime friends at me, my child. It was all *you* could do to stand up to a smell of that poison."

"I don't claim to be a hardened drinker."

"That isn't all," I said. "You said your father went out with him to put him on the road. Why did he put him on the shore road—right on to the sand itself, if he was as long away as you said he was? Why didn't he see him over the ridge?"

"How should I know? Perhaps he did."

We were distracted by a cautious movement. Charles was sitting up and squeezing the water out of his clothes. "Good old Theresa," he said again. "I like to see you with your hackles up. How did I get into all this brine? Have I been pickled?"

"Surely," said Alison. She laughed and looked at me nervously to see if I had relaxed. "Theresa thought we had been trying to poison you," she ventured, secure enough now that she knew she was not alone with me.

"Poison again! Why don't you think of something new?"

She looked taken aback, and I was thankful Charles seemed to have forgotten nothing of the situation. "They did," I said. "They thought of steering you out to the rocks and leaving you there till the tide came over you, which it was just about to do when I found you. They don't like you, Charles, for all your charm."

Charles looked at me thoughtfully. "The whisky wasn't doped," he said. "Harry drank out of the same bottle—not much, but he took a little."

"It wasn't doped, but it was bad—made from rotten grain."

"I see. I was afraid I must be slipping badly to be knocked out after half a glass. I didn't even finish it, it tasted so foul—but of course I couldn't say so to Harry."

"You don't seem to mind saying so to Harry's daughter," said Alison shortly.

"'But I am Harry's daughter and I am England's queen'," Charles quoted, and stared at her until she blushed and turned away her head. "Tell me, Theresa, what would that paragon Mr. Callendar have done in my place? Would he have knocked over his glass? He'd have been worse off than before if he had done, because it would only have been filled up again, and I had drunk some. Alison, when there's company, do you still go to bed in that cupboard in the wall?"

"No. I got in with mother until I heard you go."

"There was someone in there last night, all the same."

"There couldn't have been. Mother will tell you I was with her."

"But indeed there was: a rat behind the arras. I wish I'd been sure it wasn't you."

"There are rats around the henhouses sometimes, but we never get them in the house—the cat sees to that."

Charles stared at her long and steadily. Alison was poker-faced, sullen as a scolded child. A duel of wills went on for a moment, of which I was a discomforted and superfluous observer. Perhaps if I had been out of the way Alison might have caved in and told him everything she knew. I made myself as inconspicuous as possible, but I dared not move away.

"You're a stubborn little idiot," said Charles at last. He got to his feet and straightened up painfully, patting his hips as he did so. "Try Flett's brine baths for all rheumatic complaints, cramps, gouts and hangovers. Let's go and get some coffee, Theresa. Tell Harry I'll be round to see him later," he remarked over his shoulder to Alison, with an air so offhand as to be almost threatening. "The younger generation is beyond me," he complained as we set off towards the airfield. "That child makes me feel like a holy innocent."

"She makes my fingers itch personally. I should like to spank her."

"Yes, I've noticed she seems to arouse your maternal instincts. I never suspected you had any before—I supposed they must all have been subdued by the iron hand of the gracious Callendar. What will you do now, Theresa, now that you have thrown off the yoke? Will you look for another purveyor of property? Or will you live by your able wits?"

"If you know any wealthy widowers, you might introduce me to them."

"The creature is extinct in both its sexes."

"Well, the problem is rather remote," I said. I was quite startled to realise that he took it for granted that we had a future. "But I must say I think it's a pity they treated H. K. Andersen quite so unkindly. He sounds like the answer to a maiden's prayer."

"He wasn't the answer to Alison's."

"I don't think she comes into that category."

Charles raised his eyebrows. "I bow to your superior intuition or observation or whatever it is. But I don't think she is quite such a serpent of old Nile as you imagine. I feel sorry for her myself; I'm always sorry for precocity."

"I think it has all the advantages."

"Oh no," said Charles mournfully. "It is terrible to be more gifted than your neighbours. They all hate you—just as you, my dear, hate Alison."

"But I don't hate *you*, Charles; I rather like you."

"Good heavens, is this a proposal?"

"Well, you are a widower, if you lack the accompanying adjective."

"Rather an important omission," said Charles evasively, taking the coffee I held out to him.

"Yes," I agreed wistfully. "I suppose it is."

This was certainly the snub direct, firm and incontrovertible. I fell back upon my independence. I nourished it with thoughts of the awful story of Evadne and the fate which had overtaken her when she surrendered it. I drew a moral from Alison's sophistry, thrust upon her by the boredom attendant upon her dependent position. In my misery I belittled the solitude of Aunt Annie and exalted the material comforts of her existence. Finally I sat and examined Charles, picking all possible holes in his character and appearance.

But there is one thing about love which lacks the purity of physical passion: it also lacks its rancour and violence. It is not incapacitating. If we children of this world have not the faith and hope of the children of light, we have a greater charity. The effect of Charles' rejection was, strangely enough, not to turn my affection into scorn and hatred, but to expand and dilute it into a sickly, potentially tearful compassion for myself and him, for Alison and Colin, and for our sad human state in general.

Besides, it was tactfully done; Charles must have been an accomplished rejector. I was grateful to him for the ease with which he passed it off and forgot it, though perhaps, I thought, he might have avoided bringing matters to a head at all if he had cared to. For a moment it occurred to me that I was making unwilling atonement for the shortcomings of the unfortunate Evadne, and I felt that Evadne herself had surely done this. But I suppose there is no bounds to the compensation that a dreamer will demand from life. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, 'an illusion for an illusion: this is the *lex talionis*.

Nor does such love impair the appetite; I ate the breakfast I had forgotten in my anxiety that morning. Charles ate nothing, but displayed an abysmal capacity for black coffee.

"I didn't give you that letter I wrote, did I?" he asked suddenly. "The letter I wrote after I ate the stone?"

"No, you put it in your pocket," I said; old curiosities stirred again.

"I thought so; it isn't there now."

"What was in it?" I asked.

"What I told you about Colin." I had noticed several times that when Charles was anxious he looked more mature, and his air of strained cheerfulness deserted him. He was handsomer without it, though less appealing. I tried to show some interest in the loss of the letter, but nothing seemed quite so important as it had done a few moments before, not even our danger. It seemed somehow reduced by the fact that he had just escaped one.

"Are you wishing you had left me in the sea?" Charles asked abruptly.

"No, of course not." I was genuinely shocked at the idea.

"Dear Theresa, you always say the right thing without giving it a moment's thought. Your mind is like a slot machine; I know just what I shall get out of it if I put a certain coin in. It isn't what I want at all, but I just can't resist putting it in and hoping I might one day get a surprise."

"What do you want?" I asked. "Your weight and fortune?"

Charles gave a wail of agony. "You're all the same—what do I want? First Alison, then you. As if all I had to do was to name something and you'd turn yourselves into it; and so you do, after a fashion. Protoplasm, that's all you are; primordial jelly."

"Well, why don't you answer us? Do you really know what you want? You want the light that never was on land or sea, I suppose," I said, more in sorrow than in

anger. "You want the blessed damozel leaning over the golden bar that has no closing time. I hope you get it. As for me, all I want now is that tight little boat that's due in the morning and a return to the blessed proprieties."

"To the arms of Mr. Callendar?"

"For all I know Mr. Callendar has no arms; he may keep sausages up his sleeves. Just to an office with a gas fire and an active telephone and welsh rarebit and baked jam roll in the dairy at one o'clock."

"You make me feel quite nostalgic."

"I think it's time we went and had things out with the Fletts."

Charles shook his head gloomily. "I'm afraid it will get us nowhere; they're all as cunning as foxes. I think the best thing we can do is to play the frank and trusting innocent: pretend we think last night's affair was an accident, take them into our confidence and tell them Colin is on the island and that we've got proof—we won't say what—that he did away with Evadne, and hope that somebody will get careless."

"Harry was there as well when Evadne died," I said. "He brought her food."

I told him what Mrs. Flett and Alison had told me; at the explanation of the presence of H. K. Andersen's plane he became graver. He did not agree with me that this evidence seemed to point to Harry's guilt rather than to Colin's; he argued that it was still doubtful. But his persistence was unconvincing.

"Well," he said, "we must get Harry on the boat as well by some means, and get them both across to the police; there's a wireless on board, I suppose, so that they can contact the authorities."

"And if we can't?" I said. "When the boat comes tomorrow, what will you do?"

“I shall ambush whoever tries to get away on it.”

“That will only be me,” I said resignedly. “I don’t see why anybody else should want to; they’re all sitting pretty as long as they stay here.”

It was true: they were all quite comfortable, and there seemed no reason at all why they shouldn't continue to be so if we were to leave them alone. But it was impossible to tell what might brew below the surface and erupt unexpectedly into the mundane calm. A council of war was in progress in the Flett's parlour when we reached it, and all three looked at us sourly. Then a broad and disarming grin spread over Harry's face.

"Alison tells me you mistook the road after all," he said. "You'd never believe it, after the pains I took to put you on it." He seemed really to be enjoying the joke against himself.

"That's a poisonous liquor you keep for your friends," said Charles cautiously.

"Never say a word against my whisky," retorted Harry touchily. "It's a deal stronger than the stuff you get in London, I'll allow, but I thought you could take it. I drank some of it myself."

Charles raised his eyebrows. "I should hope so; it'd be poor hospitality to keep one bottle for yourself and another for your friends."

"Ah well, sit down," said the farmer, determined not to be provoked. "And I'll open another bottle—or maybe you'd rather have a cup of tea."

"We've just had some breakfast, thank you," I said as Mrs. Flett rose, drawing the correct conclusion that Charles would not risk the whisky again.

"You have only one more day of your holiday,"

Alison said to me gravely. "Will you be sorry to leave us?"

I wished she had said "the island", then I could truthfully have said I should be, for the place had kept its fascination in spite of all. But Mrs. Flett charitably came to my rescue. "I'm sure you'll be thankful to get away after the things that've happened," she said. "It's sad to think you'll always think of us as mixed up with people drowning and dying—though things were never as bad and black as you'd have had them. Just unlucky—but that's bad enough in all conscience." She seemed wistful, and I guessed she would be sorry to see us go. Of course they probably counted on a guest or two every summer to help things out, and we were not likely to advertise them widely.

"Unlucky—that's it," agreed Harry earnestly. "You get bad spells when everything seems to pile up on top of you, and you've happened on one of those. If we were spiteful people, we might say you'd brought it with you."

"You can hardly accuse us of bringing Mr. Andersen," I observed.

"Ah no, but you stirred things up, as you might say."

"There were some nasty things in the mud all right," said Charles.

Harry ignored this. "We were talking things over when you came in," he went on. "I was saying this spot's a sight too lonely to grow old in. In the winter you might as well be at the north pole if you fell sick or had an accident, for all the help you could get. It was that way with Mrs. Carmichael—Mrs. Pomfret, begging your pardon. She was dead before the doctor came, and as like as not he could have saved her."

He looked at me as he spoke as if challenging me to take up the implication that Evadne had died peacefully of some commonplace complaint. He sounded as if he

was even prepared to affirm that she had passed away out of sheer pique at the doctor's unavoidable delay.

"Are you thinking of moving then?" asked Charles.

"Ay, we've been thinking of it a long while. Now we've about made up our minds."

"You going far?"

"Only on to Mainland. There's a farm there I've had my eye on, a mile or so out of Stromness."

"Mr. Carmichael will miss you," I said, watching Alison. She passed her hand across her forehead and then rested her chin in her hand, holding the fingers forward to hide her face.

"He hasn't been here a long while, and he's not likely to be, if he ever comes back."

"You lying scum," said Charles sharply. "He was in that bed last night."

Mrs. Flett gave a faint scream. Charles had scarcely raised his voice, but his face was like a sculptured stone one except for his eyes, which were fixed on Harry, the eyelids blinking occasionally like a bird's. Harry's leathern face went a dull purple; his eyes started and his fingers clutched the tablecloth. He swung round on his daughter.

"Alison Flett, is that the truth?"

"How should I know?" answered Alison with elaborate carelessness. "I was with mother."

"Of course she was," Margaret Flett corroborated with relief.

Harry turned back to Charles again, with a swiftness uncanny in so ungainly a man.

"What d'you mean by saying that? Did you see him?"

"I heard something move in there, and I know he's on the island."

Harry brooded over this intently. I watched him fascinated. He was a picture of ugly, brutal power, and his still figure was instinct with menace. Yet at the same

time he was evidently a prey to indecision; the motive force behind that great bulk was faltering. I thought suddenly that perhaps Charles' accusation was unfounded; he might not have known of Colin's presence in the room last night. Perhaps he had even cause to fear him, and the news had given him a shock.

Suddenly Charles got up and crossed to the cupboard in the wall. Harry half rose from his seat as if to stop him, then sank back again and sat watching him with feline concentration. Charles lifted the pillow, then turned back the flock mattress, first at the head of the bed and then at the foot, and picked up something which lay on the boards beneath it. He turned towards us again, holding a light Webley pistol in his hand.

"My gun," he said in a strange frosty voice. "I wonder how it got there."

I looked at Alison. She was very pale, and her eyes shone with a feverish brilliance. Charles looked at her too, and so did Mr. and Mrs. Flett. She lifted her hand towards her face as if to cover it, then let it fall again and stared from one to the other of us, and then at the gun. A sort of hopelessness dropped a cloud over her eyes then, and all the spirit went out of her. She looked like a prisoner in front of the block, who suddenly realises that this is the end.

"Yes, it's yours," she said listlessly. "I took it out of your pack."

Charles was staring at her with a frown of perplexity, but his voice was gentle as he asked: "Why, Alison?"

I thought she was past rousing herself to answer him, but she seemed by a tremendous effort to summon all her strength to resist his kindness. "I didn't think you could be trusted with it," she answered coolly. "I was afraid you might do something foolish with it."

"Such as shooting your friend Mr. Carmichael?"

She looked straight into his eyes with a long steady scrutiny, and answered slowly: "Something you might be sorry for afterwards when you understood the truth—and when it was too late."

"And do *you* know the truth?"

"I've told you as much as I know. For the rest, I only know you're wrong," she said contemptuously.

In the silence that followed they were oblivious of the rest of us. Mrs. Flett too was gazing at them with agonized interest. I heard a faint escape of breath at my elbow, and I knew that Harry had had a very uncomfortable moment, but I felt it would be dangerous to look round. Charles put the gun into his pocket at last and addressed himself to Harry.

"I want your help, Flett. Carmichael will probably make for the mailboat tomorrow. We have evidence which I think is pretty conclusive that he killed Evadne, and we've got to convince the skipper that he mustn't be allowed to get away on the other side. What's the law in these parts? Has the skipper any authority?"

Alison answered him: "Colin's the law on this island; he's the laird."

"Then we must get him on to the ship without his suspecting anything. They'll have a wireless presumably, and can contact the police on Mainland."

"You're making a fool of yourself, Charles Pomfret," Alison said. Charles turned on her sharply.

"Don't make any mistake, Alison. I'm not making a fool of myself, and no one else is making a fool of me either. Colin left you a note in that bed, didn't he? What've you arranged between you?"

She went red, and then white as paper. As Charles faced her a strange uncertainty darkened his eyes, that deepened into horror. He said shakily: "It wouldn't be another twenty-seventh of June, by any chance?"

Mrs. Flett gave a shocked exclamation, and Harry swore. But Alison seemed past resenting anything; she only smiled a little bitterly and said: "You're so clever, if you'd only been a little bit more human you might have helped us." Then, still smiling rather foolishly, as if she were past taking any further interest in what went on, she moved her stool round and stared into the fire.

I felt suddenly that I could bear it no longer. I knew Charles would get no more out of her however hard he pressed, and I knew he would go on hammering at her as soon as he had recovered himself, tormenting both her and himself in his jealousy of Colin and his anger at her resistance.

"I must go," I said, standing up. "I have to put my things together and clear up. You'll help us, Mr. Flett? The man's a murderer."

"I'll help you," said Harry grimly. He pointed to his shotgun which leaned against the wall. "He'll not get away."

"There's no need to watch Carmichael. What we want is your help to influence the skipper. He's a friend of yours, I suppose?"

"Oh ay, we're friendly enough," said Harry.

"We'll see you there when the boat comes in," I said, and I waited for Charles outside the doorway. He came after me gloomy and thoughtful.

"Why did you walk out on me like that?" he demanded. "I'd have got the whole thing out of her if you'd given me time, but your getting up like that gave her just the distraction she was hoping for."

"You'll get nothing out of her; you're only tormenting her. Anyhow, I believe she's told us all she knows."

"They're planning something," he burst out in helpless rage. "My God, it makes my blood boil to feel this—this conspiracy going on under our noses."

"What makes you think that?"

"Why else should Colin have gone to look for her last night? He must have heard Flett and me coming and got into bed to hide from us."

"Harry's afraid of him, I think. He was uneasy when he heard he'd been in the house."

"I don't blame him," said Charles. "They know too much about each other to be good friends."

"Charles, we're not going to get much sleep tonight. If you were in Harry's place, and you knew that two prize idiots were going to help you pin the murders you had done on an innocent man, how would you be feeling?"

"I'd be patting myself on the back and thinking it was in the bag. I think we've got better reason to sleep soundly tonight than we've had since you came to Harbister."

"As far as our own comfort is concerned, I think we have; but I don't feel happy about it. Suppose the innocent man had some proof of his innocence?"

"There's that about it, of course. But I feel we'd have heard about it if he had."

"If he had, he'd be much safer out of the way before he could produce it, whatever the risk. I don't like the way Harry looked at that gun of his. He could always stage a struggle and let it off as if by accident, and say Colin had tried to get away."

"By swimming?"

"In the launch, you fathcad."

"Of course. Yes, you're right—we shall have to watch the boat. Even if Harry doesn't think of that one, Colin might try a get-away."

"Perhaps we ought to warn him not to."

"I think we can leave that to Alison. I'll guarantee he knows everything that's been going on in a quarter of

an hour from now. I'll stay among the sandhills, Theresa, while you go back and put your things together; then you can come and relieve me. After dark, we'd better both hang around near the boat, and take it in turns to sleep."

"Nothing is likely to happen till dark, though, is it? Let's go back and have a decent meal."

"Does nothing ever put you off your food?" asked Charles with a sigh.

AT about ten o'clock at night, in a rose-coloured twilight, I went along the shore to join Charles in his vigil among the sandhills. Sea, sky and sand were tinged with touches of pink and amethyst like the feathers of a pigeon's breast. The long ness at the end of the island ran out darkly into the water, which was as still tonight as the waters of Harbister Loch. Small effortless undulations moved under the shallows like a mole underground, broke surface a few feet from the waterline in gentle effervescence, and left a thin white scallop on the sand: the tide was ebbing. It would turn, I thought, in two hours from now, and I thought of the old superstition that people were born when the tide was high and died at the lowest ebb. I could not help but fear that whatever the island had witnessed before our coming, our arrival might have precipitated tragedy. It was perhaps easier for me to acknowledge this, being only a witness of events: Charles, I could see, was as much a part of them as any of the island's inhabitants, and his involvement could not have been avoided. The thought heightened the barrier between us; he seemed like a creature subject to a different law.

I crossed the little headland where only that morning I had found him sleeping; now it was high and dry, and the sea had been so calm all day that I could still see the two sets of footmarks, his and mine, converging on the rocks. The launch was anchored in very shallow water a hundred yards away: the tide would just about leave

her high and dry before it turned. If she set out then the flow would cover any footprints in the sand, and reveal them, if at all, only twelve hours later when the mailboat had come and gone.

I found Charles lying in a little valley on the edge of the dunes which looked across the beach towards the launch. He was surrounded by a circle of cigarette stubs.

"Nothing doing?" I asked.

"Everything quiet and normal. Harry went up to feed the hens just now; otherwise I haven't seen him all day. Nobody else has moved far away from the house. I hope Alison's all right."

"Suppose Harry doesn't think of the boat, and Colin tries to get away in it. Do we let him?"

"No."

"Why not? You can't really still believe he's guilty. We know Harry was around when Evadne died, and supplied her with food. We know he tried to get rid of you. I'd take my oath he used the same trick to finish Andersen."

"Probabilities won't satisfy the police; we've got to get them both and make them face each other. Look out," he added suddenly, pulling me back down the slope. "He's coming this way."

Harry was walking from the henhouses down to the beach, along a path he had worn for himself across the coarse grass. He had picked up a can of petrol from some cache, and he went down to the boat and filled her up. He was there quite a while doing something else to her which we couldn't make out from that distance, though I thought I heard the sound of a saw. Then he sat on the gunwale and lit a pipe and stayed there staring away towards the cliffs in the south-west until the glow left the sky and the air was noticeably chill. He seemed reluctant to go back to the house; twice he

roused himself and started towards it, and each time he came back to adjust some detail, as if he hated to leave the boat. At last he picked up the can and went back along the beach, passing quite close to us. I was afraid he would see my footprints, but he was lost in thought, and his face when he passed near to us was grave and resolute.

I think I fell asleep then, for I was wakened suddenly by a dig from Charles, and it was quite dark. Looking towards the boat, I saw a small steady light like a torch moving over it. As my eyes adjusted themselves I made out the hulk at the water's edge, and could see a figure leaning over it. There was a rattle of chain, quickly silenced, as the anchor was lifted.

"Stay here and keep a look out for Harry," Charles said. "I've got my gun." He stood up and began to run stealthily down the dune, then stopped in his tracks, dropped flat and began to crawl back.

The torch, which had been invisible while the anchor was being lifted, had appeared again, and as it did so there came the crack of a shot from the sandhills on our right. The circle of light made a sudden arc through the air and fell on the sand; the figure crouching over the boat suddenly slipped and made one dark mass with the hull. Harry waited a moment, and then came slowly down the beach, his gun on his arm, like a gamekeeper going to pick up a rabbit.

"We'll have to wait till he puts down the gun," said Charles' voice in my ear. I was stunned by what had happened, and could not have made a movement; the words went on echoing in my head as if they were hammering on a door which had been shut in their faces. The scene took on that quality of monumental calm that is strangely associated with moments of great tension; the black outline of the boat, the glowing torch on the sand, and the soft eerie lap of the water that presently

made its impact on my sharpened senses. I heard the marram grasses rustling and Charles' heavy breathing beside me; far, far away, like a voice from another world, I heard the cry of a lapwing that had been benighted. Ages passed while we lay there and Harry stood motionless looking down at the corpse. But suddenly the cogs engaged again; he laid down his gun on the sand, put out the torch and bent over the body. Charles began to crawl down the sand dune. The blood in my body began to flow again and I realised I would be called upon for action.

But Charles had gone and I didn't know what action was required of me. I sat up and put my head between my knees, and after a moment I slid down the dune and followed him. The sand muffled our footsteps and the dark dunes behind us engulfed our outlines; we approached to within ten feet of Harry, who was bending over the boat. Suddenly the engine started and I jumped a yard back. As he turned to pick up Colin's body Charles stepped up beside it.

"Theresa, pick up the gun. Don't move, Flett."

I picked it up and retreated out of Harry's reach. The farmer was dazed and silent. The darkness made the whole action like a masque; we could see each other's outlines, but our faces, the mirrors of our plans and passions, were blotted out. Each movement sprang out of a void and could not be anticipated. Flett was standing in shallow water, his hand on the launch's side, and the noise and vibration of the engine seemed tremendous. Yet I realised afterwards that it must have been muffled in some way, for Charles did not need to raise his voice to be heard above it.

"Switch off the engine," he said, and Harry turned towards it. It seemed to take him a long time to find the switch, so long that I nearly cried out in an agony

of impatience. I was afraid I was going to faint; the boat seemed to be receding very, very slowly.

Charles and I both realised at the same moment that it actually was receding. And at that instant Flett kicked up the spray in our faces and flung himself into the launch, down on his face in the bottom of it, and opened the throttle. 'The helm must have been fixed beforehand, for she shot straight out to sea, and in a second had vanished into the darkness. Charles' shot was far over Harry's head. We stood paralysed listening to the lessening roar of the engine and the swish of the wake, which suddenly ceased. And quite suddenly the engine too coughed, spluttered and stopped.

"It's failed," I said, and waited tensely for it to start again. Charles had found the torch and shone it on the sand.

"He's scuttled it," he said. "Look."

He picked up a small white board newly sawn out of the side of the launch. "Sawn out just above the water-line when she was empty. It was all fixed waiting for Colin to dispose of himself, but he's left Colin behind."

As soon as it was light we took the dinghy and rowed up and down the bay. There was a chance that Harry had got the helm free and the hole stopped before the boat shipped water, but the sounds we had heard showed that the wash had quickly reached the engine. A patch of oil a quarter of a mile out was all we could find which added to our knowledge. By tacit agreement we stayed out there long after we had given up hope of finding anything more conclusive, because we saw Alison on the shore and knew that she had found Colin's body. Later she was joined by Mrs. Flett, who stood at the water's edge watching us until we were obliged reluctantly to turn towards the shore and face her questions and her grief.

WHEN we landed Alison got up from the sand by Colin's body and walked deliberately away from us. She went over the ridge in the direction of Harbister, stopping sometimes to look back, but plainly anxious to avoid us. Mrs. Flett came slowly towards us and stood in silence while we beached the boat. Her expression was enigmatic; she was dry-eyed and self-possessed, on the defensive certainly; perhaps she was even accusing us of murder in her thoughts.

"Tell me what happened," she said. "I heard a shot "

While Charles spoke she gazed into his eyes with a look of grave and strained concentration, as if trying to read there whether he was telling the truth; once she looked swiftly to me for corroboration. When he had ended she nodded gravely and looked away out to sea; tears filled her eyes, but she wiped them away before they fell.

"Yes," she said. "That was how it would be. I knew he had something in his mind last night, but I thought it was maybe the idea of leaving Hani. Is there nothing to be seen?"

"Only a patch of oil."

"I suppose you'll say it was better so," she said bitterly. "But I can't really think so. I always felt there would be some way out."

"He had three deaths on his conscience, Mrs. Flett."

"Oh yes, I know, I know," she said impatiently; she made a sad little helpless gesture and turned back towards the farm, and we walked up the beach beside

her. When we reached Colin's body she stood a moment looking down at him, then shook her head heavily and turned away.

"The boat'll be here presently," she said, as if to excuse her preoccupation. "I must see to the eggs and the stores when it comes."

"You won't stay here alone, will you?" Charles asked uncertainly.

"I don't know; I can't think yet."

"Let me help you get the eggs packed," I offered.

"No, they're all ready down on the jetty. There's nothing to do but hand things over." She looked as if this was something to be regretted, and she would have been glad of something which demanded doing urgently.

"Then I'd better go and get my own gear from the airfield."

"You're going today?" she asked, as if realising her isolation for the first time.

"Not if I can be of any help to you."

I said it as cordially as I could, but I was longing to leave the island behind me, and to miss the boat would mean staying another week. To my relief Mrs. Flett, having considered the offer, rejected it with a sigh.

"I don't see that you can. You've got business of your own, I expect; we've no right to thrust our troubles on you."

"My business can easily wait; it's not urgent."

"If you'd take a message to my sister in Stromness I'd be much obliged."

"I will of course. But why not come with me and pay her a visit?"

"Who would look after the hens and the goats?" She looked up the slope towards the hen houses, and added, as if surprised at the realization: "It's seven years since I slept a night away from Harbister."

"I suppose Alison will be back soon?"

She looked at me and smiled as if at my ingenuousness. "I don't want to seem ungrateful, but she'll come the sooner if you go away."

The truth of this was apparent from Alison's departure on sight of us; I wasn't sorry to be relieved of my duties of consolation, and I left her to write to her sister and went back to Charles. He had been through Colin's pockets and was standing with an envelope in his hand reading its contents, which I recognized as the letter he himself had written on the first morning after our meeting. He showed it to me.

"A clever idea, getting an independent witness against Colin. I found this in the breast pocket, but it was put there after he died."

"How can you tell?"

"It was right under the hole made by the bullet, and there isn't a mark on the paper." He bent down and showed me a round, brown-rimmed hole in the cloth. "If it'd been there before Colin was shot the bullet would have been bound to go through it. Harry took it from me last night; it was just what he wanted to fix Evadne's death on him. He wasn't going to risk his turning up again like H.K.A. without any explanation of his absence. But it was too dark for him to notice the hole in the jacket."

I found it difficult to take any interest in such niceties of observation now; the case had been taken out of our hands, and by an authority far more competent to deal with it. Suddenly from the other side of the headland there was the hoot of a ship's siren. Flocks of birds who had been wading on the sands there rose noisily into the air, wheeled round and swept off towards Harbister Loch. The old dog ran out of the farmyard and down towards the jetty, barking. The mailboat had arrived.

Charles went down to see the captain of the boat and I set out for the tower to collect my possessions. Harbister was basking in the morning sunlight, untroubled by the night's drama. The air shimmered already over the broken concrete runways. I wondered who would be the next human visitor to happen on those twentieth-century ruins, and whether they would know the history of the Ham Farm buildings, now destined to the same neglect, and the overgrown dereliction of Harbister House. In our time it takes only a few decades to make an ancient monument, for we have lost the art, or the inclination, of building for eternity. Perhaps they would find the relics of past and passing occupation on Harbister as remote as any Roman keep or British earthwork. When I had packed the last of my chattels I thrust Charles' possessions into his pack, for I suppose I still had a sneaking hope that he might be leaving with me. At least I was determined to leave him no excuse for missing the boat if he was hesitating.

The little jetty was a scene of great activity when I mounted the ridge above Ham Farm and looked down on it. Two deck-hands carried the boxes of eggs from the pier on to the ship, where a clumsy crane lowered them into the hold. A shorthorn calf, an addition to Harry's small herd, was led off the ship to the end of the jetty and tethered there. Mrs. Flett, Charles and the captain stood on the pier talking, and presently Mrs. Flett left them and returned towards the farm, followed a few moments later by two sailors with a stretcher. Charles and the skipper went on board, and I went down and on to the boat to find them.

Captain Marwood received me with a nod and a penetrating look from his bright, inquisitive brown eyes. He was a small, neat, dark man who looked too energetic for life on so small a ship. Charles paused only a moment

on my entrance, and then went on with his story, to which the captain listened with no more than an occasional sharp birdlike movement of his head to signify his interest.

"Captain Andersen was the skipper on this run before me," he observed when Charles had told of the finding of H. K. Andersen's body. "I think he had a hunch that Flett had a hand in his boy's disappearance. He hated him like no one's business, and he didn't survive it long." He gave me a quick glance on hearing that it was I who had found the body. After Charles had told him about the rotten whisky he got up as if reminded by it and offered us both a drink.

"They'll sell up the farm, I suppose," he observed. "Those two women won't be able to keep it on themselves even if they felt like it."

"Alison might marry."

"A young fellow might not want to live in so lonely a spot; can't think why anybody should, myself. Well, it'll shorten my run by a couple of hours not having to call here," he added with satisfaction. "More than that, often; for she draws more water than there always is at the end of this jetty, and we often have to wait for the flow."

The conversation drifted into an exchange of wartime experiences. I sat uncomfortably on my plush-upholstered seat and listened to the rattle of the chains in the hold and the shouted directions of the sailors, and felt the moment of my inconspicuous departure draw closer with a growing feeling of deflation. I had had no more than a walking-on part in this drama, and I was outside the circle of its chief protagonists. For them there was another scene to play, but for me there was only an unnoticed exit. The return to the hum-drum life which had seemed so desirable under the threat of danger no longer exhilarated me; I hated the thought of it.

"I put your things in your pack," I remarked to Charles as we left the boat. Charles, still glowing with the excitement of his reminiscences, clapped his hand on my shoulder.

"That's fine; I'll go and get them."

"Are you leaving today?"

"Leaving Harbister? No." He looked anxiously towards the hills and the loch. "I can't walk out on Mrs. Flett. I'll have to stay and see to things for her."

"And for Alison."

"And for Alison," he repeated. He picked up my bag from the jetty and carried it on board for me, and stood waiting while the preparations were made for the boat's departure. Neither of us had anything much to say.

"See you again," he called finally as the jetty slid away. I nodded and waved.

It was one of those farewells which are intended to do temporary or permanent duty as the occasion demands. "If we do not meet again, why, we shall smile. If not, why, then, this parting was well made."

IN Kirkwall I left my bag at one of the little hotels opposite the harbour and went with Captain Marwood to see the local police. Captain Marwood could not have been kinder, but I found it difficult to keep my attention on his studiously commonplace conversation. Ever since the boat had moved away from Ham Jetty I had had an increasing feeling of unreality; it was as if a part of me had been frozen into the scene and events of last night, like a fish frozen into a pond, and the part of me which was carried away was fastened to it by an invisible thread which stretched with ever-increasing tension. I wondered whether it would break at last and set me free, even if a little battered, or whether my hold on the everyday life to which I was returning would snap, so that I got carried back against all laws of time and space into that inferno of undigested sensation.

The Chief Constable's office surprised me into observation; it was not in the least like my idea of a police station. I hadn't quite expected to find a rack and thumbscrews on the wall, but I suppose I had counted on something giving it away—a bill bearing the picture of a wanted criminal, perhaps, or a pair of handcuffs lying casually on the desk. There was a vase of flowers there instead; it looked as if crime was absolutely unknown in Kirkwall. But when the chief constable came in it took on an official air in spite of these.

“Good morning, Captain Marwood,” he said. “What’s this you’ve got? A smuggler or a stowaway?”

Captain Marwood was taking no liberties on our short

acquaintance, so he didn't attempt a reply immediately. He turned the leather easy chair round to face the desk and offered it to me, and himself took the wooden one opposite the officer.

"I brought this young lady from Harbister this morning," he said, accepting a cigarette. "Terrible things have been happening there, and she had the bad luck to walk into them."

The Chief Constable looked at me; the jocular half-smile faded from his face, and his eyes looked shrewd and solemn. I felt that his look had a penetration which was almost embarrassing, ignoring my looks, my sex and my clothes, so many things which I had always regarded as quite important parts of my character, and imagined that other people did so too; I still think they do on most occasions. But after a week on Harbister, I dare say none of these were very striking. Whatever was left of me seemed to come out of the examination fairly well, for he smiled in an unaffectedly friendly manner, got up out of his chair and offered me a cigarette.

"Friend of Carmichael's or visitor to the Fletts?" he asked. "I heard they had a boarder, but I got the impression it was a young man."

"Yes, it was," I said. "I went there on my own to camp on the airfield. I wanted to watch birds." In view of the violent events I had intruded upon, my original purpose sounded foolish in the extreme. But the Chief Constable nodded with no sign of disbelief.

"You couldn't have hit on a better spot," he said. "Stack Head is noted for them—not only by ornithologists. We get egg thieves up there sometimes in the breeding season. Not just the local boys taking a bagful for supper, but shiploads coming up from Glasgow. They bring a trawler and a couple of dozen men and collect them by the thousand."

"What a shame."

"It is a shame; it's not so bad, fortunately, now that hens' eggs are easier. Well, and what *did* you see, besides the birds?" he prompted.

"Harry Flett and Mr. Carmichael are dead," said Captain Marwood, seeing that I hardly knew where to begin. The Chief Constable sat down again promptly and drew a note-book from the drawer of his desk.

"How did it happen?" he asked, and then looked from the captain to me.

"Flett shot Colin Carmichael," I said, "and then drowned himself by scuttling his own boat."

"Are those two women over there on their own?" he asked the captain.

"No. Charles Pomfret, the young man who was staying there, is with them."

He lifted the telephone and rang through to the neighbouring airfield, at the same time pressing the bell-button on his desk. A constable put his head round the door and waited while he gave instructions to the officer there to send off the air ambulance to Harbister. "One of my men will be with you in five minutes," he added, nodding to the man, who nodded back and disappeared. Captain Marwood picked up the newspaper which lay on the corner of his desk and read the headlines, and I sat back in my chair smoking mechanically and fighting to overcome a sudden sleepiness which threatened to engulf me. I had hardly had any sleep for the last two nights, I remembered, and it was a battle to keep my eyes open. I gave up the struggle at last and closed them, lulled by the brisk unhesitating voice on the telephone. After a second it seemed to change in tone, to become sibilant and urgent, and I found myself listening again to Charles' frantic whisper as he scrambled back to my side among the sandhills. The tinkle of the bell as the Chief Constable

set the receiver down coincided with the crack of Harry's shot, and I sat up with a start. I was still holding the cigarette, which had burned down almost to my fingers. A policeman came in with a mug of tea for me, and I remembered Mrs. Flett's letter.

"Could somebody take this to Stromness, to Mrs. Flett's sister?" I asked, producing it.

The Chief Constable looked at the address and handed it to the man, who took it and went out. I wondered whether they would examine it outside, or whether they would deliver it unopened, but I was too tired to care much. I drank the strong sweet tea gratefully and tried to think back to the beginning of the story. It began, I supposed, with my seeing the aircraft, but was it necessary to tell them about that? How was I to explain Charles' destruction of it? I had thought it would be quite simple to tell the story to anyone without giving rise to misunderstandings, but suddenly I saw the difficulty of ever telling the truth about human actions. That difficulty was that you could never start at the beginning, for the beginning was always an individual and not a fact, an attitude and not an action. The Chief Constable seemed mysteriously to divine my quandary, for he said suddenly:

"How about this young man Charles Pomfret? Where does he come into the story?"

"His wife ran away with Mr. Carmichael. He was afraid something had happened to her, so he came up to investigate."

"Ah, that was it, of course; I thought the name rang a bell. That was the girl they buried last December."

"Then she did die of diabetes?"

The officer nodded; he rang the bell again, and the constable who had brought my tea put his head in. "See if you can get in touch with Dr. Finlay when he comes

back to the airfield," he said, "and ask him to call in next time he's passing. Of course," he said as the door closed again, "he hadn't been attending her, and there are things that produce symptoms like those of diabetes."

"Is strychnine one of them?"

"Could be; there are circumstances when diabetes could cause convulsions instead of the more usual coma, just as strychnine has been known to produce coma instead of convulsions. It depends on the constitution of the victim, I suppose. What made you think of strychnine?"

I told him of our finding the dead starling, and Charles' strange behaviour; he frowned as I described his drinking the dissolved stone, and exchanged glances with Captain Marwood. When I went on to tell the story behind this and to describe the walk to Harbister and the finding of the grave he gave up his intermittent scribbling on the notepad and watched my face intently. I stopped, startled by his concentration; I was afraid he would miss some of his notes and ask me to repeat myself. All I wanted, I felt, was to get to the end of my story and then sleep; I wanted it more than anything in the world. But then I thought of my doze while he was telephoning and wondered whether sleep when it came would be the dreamless vacuum I had always known.

"Go on," he said. "You spent the night in the old control tower, and Pomfret was still delirious?"

"No, he was quite normal then, after he had rolled in the nettles, but very weak. He told me about the starlings, and about his wife and Carmichael."

"You never thought that he might be raving, that it sounded a most extraordinary story?"

"Too extraordinary for a sick man's invention," said Captain Marwood. The Chief Constable did not look at him, but waited for my answer.

"I was quite sure he couldn't be, because of his picking up the starling the night before."

"And he was perfectly well when you first met him?"

"Perfectly."

"In the garden at Harbister, when you heard him cry out, did you go to him, or did he come to you?"

"I went to him." I said.

"So you saw this hole in the ground for yourself?"

"Yes."

"Did it look to you as if it might have been a grave?"

With an effort I recalled the overgrown garden, the stunted hawthorn hedge and the earth exposed beneath it, and Charles sitting on the edge of the hole with his head in his hands. Tears smarted suddenly in my eyes.

"It looked as if it might have been one, and somebody had tried to cover it up."

"Marwood," said the Chief Constable unexpectedly, scribbling on his pad while he spoke and not looking at the captain. "Do me a favour, will you? Slip out to your tobacconist and get me a packet of Player's. There's a dearth of them this week, but I know you can always manage it."

"I have some," I said. "Please have one of mine."

"No, no, I wouldn't dream of it. I rely on Captain Marwood always when there's a tobacco famine."

"I conclude I'm not under suspicion then?" Marwood asked. He smiled ruefully as he stood up, having plainly seen through the ruse to get rid of him.

"Not at the moment. We'll come to your part of the story later."

The Captain went out. His going let a whirl of cold air into the smoky room, for the outer door in the room beyond was evidently open, and left a horrid vacuum behind. The net curtains over the window behind the officer fluttered in the draught, and he put up a hand to

rub the back of his neck while he contemplated whatever it was he had written. The sense of security which I had felt slowly growing slipped out with Captain Marwood; I suddenly noticed a file of papers on the desk at his right hand, and I supposed that that was what they called a dossier. I had a stupid conviction that it must be my own. The presence of the vase of flowers, instead of reassuring me, now seemed a touch of devastating irony. I forgot my desire to sleep and concentrated on marshalling the incidents of my story. The Chief Constable looked up at me suddenly and smiled encouragingly.

"Well, you went to sleep eventually, I suppose, and in the morning the storm was over. What did you do then?"

"I was thankful to see that Charles was better, and I went off to Stack Head to photograph birds, while he went down to Harbister House."

"Again? Why was that?"

I hesitated, thinking of Charles' avowed intention of wrecking any boat he might find. "He wanted to see if he could find any of the berries."

"No other reason?"

"No other reason," I said firmly, and looked him straight in the face. His features did not move a muscle, but the friendliness in them faded, and the silence stretched and stretched. I plunged on at last, determined to destroy its deepening significance.

"While I was watching the birds I saw the shearwaters were all heading for one spot directly under the bluff where I was sitting. I climbed lower down to see what it was they were finding there, and I saw there were lots of fish round what looked like a body. I went back to look for Charles, and then I saw someone else coming over the hill towards——" I stopped suddenly, stricken with panic. Now I should have to tell him about Colin and the aeroplane and Charles' destruction of it, and he

already thought Charles' actions odd. I felt desperately for a cigarette, and he watched me light it; the trembling of my hands seemed to me to shake my whole body. When I looked up again his face was very grave and coldly formal. A leaden depression settled down on me. I smoked and returned him stare for stare and determined I would not say another word until he questioned me. But he said nothing, only tapped with his pencil against his teeth and watched the smoke of my cigarette.

"There's something I forgot," I said at last, and he nodded approvingly.

"I thought there was. Well, tell it me now, please."

I told him about the aircraft, and that Colin had been carrying petrol to it, and then I described our landing of the body, the finding of the bracelet, Alison's attempt to retrieve it, the name and date on the disc and the interpretation of Evadue's letter. . Though he listened patiently and took many notes, I felt his sympathy had left me. Probably I had only imagined it was there in the beginning. I began to see that up to now my story incriminated no one more than Charles, and I hastened on to the Flett family situation, and what we had discovered and concluded about the position and proceedings of H. K. Andersen. Somehow it sounded less convincing than it had seemed before; I could not help but feel his scepticism.

"Andersen was lost over a year ago, didn't you know?" he asked. "There wouldn't be much left of him if he had been in the sea all that time."

"I believe he had been buried in Harbister House garden, and dug up only a short time ago."

"Why, and by whom?"

"By Harry Flett—he buried him there in the first place because he knew there would be a search made for him at sea, and perhaps on the island. Nobody would notice anything strange if the earth was freshly turned in a

garden; the Carmichaels had been living there until only a short time before."

"That's so; but why dig him up again?"

"I think because he knew Carmichael was trying to sell the house; he was afraid the new owner would find the body. Or perhaps he had always intended to bury it somewhere else when the search had been given up."

He nodded again. "So you think Andersen was black-mailing him about the liaison with Mrs. Pomfret?"

"And trying to force him to put pressure on Alison—but Alison could tell you if that were so. I got the impression he was fond of his wife," I added. "Dependent on her, in a way."

"No doubt; I dare say he would have missed her if she'd left him. And now we come to the events of last night," he said more briskly. "You say Flett shot Carmichael?"

"Yes. Charles and I both saw him do it."

"Will you explain to me how you happened to be there?"

I told him about Harry's attempt to dispose of Charles, and our final interview in the cottage, and then of our night-long watch over the launch. This time I felt I had his attention, and my courage rose when I saw what seemed like a revival of belief in my story. I told him of Harry's visit to the boat and of the sound like sawing, and then of Colin's attempt to launch it in the dark, interrupted by the shot. The scene was imperishably vivid in my mind, and I knew I carried conviction. It was a strange relief to describe it, and words came to me almost without thought. In this part of the story at least there was no room for doubt and no need for speculation; I was describing the evidence of my own eyes.

"Thank you," he said, when I had finished my story. "That is a full and useful statement. As I understand it

then, Mr. Pomfret was not actually at your side when you heard the shot?"

I began to feel the return of mistrust. "No, he had moved away a second before."

"But he was still in sight, I suppose?"

"It was dark," I protested, "and we were hiding among the sandhills. I couldn't actually see him."

"In that moment, then, he himself could have fired the shot that killed Mr. Carmichael? You say he carried a gun?"

"He did, but the shot came from further on my right, and Charles came back immediately he heard it."

"Did Mr. Pomfret ever explain to you how he came to be armed?"

I did not answer. It was uncanny how accurately and intuitively he had divined my feelings and put his finger on the one thing which had caused me personal uneasiness. But no evasion was allowed me, and after a moment he repeated his question in exactly the same words, and with no sign of impatience.

"No," I said briefly. Then a thought struck me, and I blurted out with intense relief: "But you can find the bullet and check on that. Harry's gun was a shot gun, and Charles' was a Webley pistol."

He nodded, but did not seem as much impressed by the finality of the argument as I had been. "When you were standing near the boat, were you close enough to hear everything he said to Mr. Flett?"

"Everything; he couldn't have whispered a word without my hearing it."

"I should like you to repeat what he said again, please, just as you remember it."

I repeated it carefully word for word, and he wrote it painstakingly down again. "And now we are getting near the end of our recital," he said cheerfully, looking

up with a deprecating smile. "You say the boat was scuttled, but what made you think that? Just its rapid sinking?"

"I had thought I heard a saw."

"Ah yes," he nodded. "I remember."

"And afterwards," I recalled, inwardly thanking providence for what I had thought at the time an irrelevant and ill-timed observation, "Charles picked up a piece of wood painted white from the sand and showed it to me. It had certainly been cut from the boat."

"Do you remember what he did with it then?"

"I don't; I expect he dropped it."

"It should still be about somewhere then," he said reassuringly, but I shook my head despondently. "The tide will have been up since then; it will have floated away."

"Well, cheer up, Miss Barr; nobody doubts your story, you know. We're only trying to find out if you could have been mistaken. And now one more question—how long have you known Mr. Pomfret?"

"Less than a week; I told you I met him on my first day on Harbister."

"Did he mention ever having visited the island before?"

"No," I said shortly; the way he kept returning to Charles exasperated and unnerved me. "I don't think he had ever been there before, because——"

"Because of what?" he prompted.

"Because he never said so," I said lamely. "It would have been important to his story; he would hardly have forgotten to mention it."

"Quite so," he said, so conclusively that I feared we must have arrived at different conclusions. He put his notebook back in his drawer, sat back in his chair with his hands clasped on the edge of the desk in front of him and gazed at me with a paternal air which I did not find

at all reassuring. I began to understand why people sometimes confessed to crimes they had not done, for his air of esoteric knowledge was so convincing that I felt if he had told me I had shot Colin myself in a moment of frenzy I should have believed him and gone humbly to my doom. But not if he had told me that Charles had done it. If he was suggesting that, I knew he must be mistaken; and if he had such insight that he never made mistakes, then he was malevolent. I suppose something of my indignation must have shown in my face, for he began to explain himself patiently.

"I'm afraid you think I'm showing an unnecessary amount of interest in the personalities of this case and not enough in your clear and factual account of the murder. But there are some curious points about the people as well as the occasion, aren't there? And I'll tell you what seems the nastiest thing about it to me as a policeman: so many of them were apparently habitually armed -- that is, they carried the means of death about with them. Now as a law-abiding citizen, which I'm sure you are, don't you think it rather odd yourself that Mr. Carmichael should have preserved those berries, although he knew their poisonous nature, and that your friend Mr. Pomfret should have carried a gun, while Harry Flett seems to have been possessed of both these weapons of destruction? I don't like it, Miss Barr; it looks like a long-term programme."

It seemed useless to explain to him that these men had all been trained to deal death, and were only using the tool which had been put into their hands; he was an official and could not allow the force of such arguments. "If Colin had been planning to use the seeds on Evadne," I maintained, "he would hardly have explained their nature to the Fletts. And Harry seems to have provided most of the food while she was ill; Alison says he brought

most of it over from the farm ready cooked. As for Charles' gun, he came to Harbister because he suspected foul play; he'd have been a fool not to have come prepared for more."

"There's Mrs. Pomfret now," he continued imperturbably. "I expect you're right, if that letter really was a cipher—only Andersen's murderer could have had an interest in putting her out of the way. If Mr. Pomfret can produce an alibi for the time of her death, that'll be a help to all of us. Where are you staying?" he asked, getting up to show that the interview was really over. "You'll stay in Kirkwall for the present, I hope, until we've got this business sorted out?"

"I suppose that means that I have no option?"

"Not at all, but it would be of very great assistance to us. And if you don't, I'm afraid I must ask you to keep us informed of your whereabouts and to be ready to return here if necessary, as it almost certainly will be. You'll receive a summons to the inquest, of course; that will probably be tomorrow or the next day."

"I'll stay; I left my bag at the Earl Magnus."

"It shouldn't take us long," he said, opening the door and holding out his hand.

I went out and made my way back to the hotel. All desire for sleep had left me, and I went over and over my story in my mind, thinking of all the points I had left ambiguous, all the places where a different phrase would have kept Charles quite out of the picture and directed the Chief Constable's attention along the proper lines. How had he managed to make it sound so unlikely? I had told him nothing but the truth. But evidently I had bungled it hopelessly; I had magnified the strangeness of Charles' behaviour and neglected to emphasise Harry's; I had not been confident enough about our own conclusions, or been able to describe

exactly the evidence on which they were based. I had as good as hung Charles.

Ought I to warn him that he was a suspect, in spite of the evidence of my own eyes which I had faithfully recounted? But how could I do that, without making them think that he had something to fear? And wasn't my thought of doing so due to a sneaking desire to see him again, rather than to any care for his safety? It was, I decided; all my anxiety was only a cover for that, and I was exaggerating absurdly the Chief Constable's naturally omnivalent suspicions. I must put my faith in the integrity of others, and not feel as if everything depended on the way I had told my story. They could find nothing which would not bear it out.

I went up to my room and sat in the window. I had been there about half an hour when I saw a plane rise from the airfield a mile away and pass out to sea in the direction of Harbister. I supposed they were going to look for the sunken launch, and I hoped devoutly that they would find it.

THE next morning was bright and still, suggesting a hot day to follow. Everything seemed to be reserving its energy. The sea was smooth and vividly blue and almost silent, the terns flew dreamily above its shallows with slow strokes of their graceful wings, and there was little activity about the harbour. I walked up the hill behind the little town, persuading myself that I was looking for birds, but secretly hoping for a glimpse of the distant Harbister. But there was a haze over the sea which hid the horizon and the neighbouring islands.

There was just such a haze, I reflected, sitting down on a pile of peat turves, shrouding my view of my own future. I was tied in Kirkwall for the next few days, and I should, I supposed, see Charles again at the inquest. But there my horizon ended; everything beyond it was an abyss. I pictured the future as being very like the past, and supposed that I should get used to it soon enough, even to Mr. Callendar's successor, "that not impossible he 'That shall command my life and me'". I would take care that he was as unlike Charles as possible, but that would not be difficult; for where, indeed, should I find anybody who resembled him?

I found myself picturing Harbister with a disturbing clarity, in its new-found peace of the afterstorm, with Charles and Alison walking like Adam and Eve in an expurgated Eden. Then the picture was clouded by the memory of what had passed; Harbister could never be for them a place of tranquillity, any more than it could

have been for me if I had remained there. Eden would always be haunted by sibilant whispers and furtive movements, and it was our first ancestors' imaginations which had really driven them out.

I had received the summons that morning to attend the inquest, which was fixed for the following day, and all it had meant to me at first, I am afraid, was the certainty of seeing Charles again. But the peace and misty brightness of the morning had had their effect, and I began at last to take a less personal view, and to see us all as we should appear to the strangers who would hear our stories the next morning. After all, I had found what I had asked for: I had a tale to while away old age.

The hum of an approaching aeroplane seemed to enhance the drowsiness of the increasing heat; I could hear it some time before I saw it, a tiny silver toy hanging on the fringe of the mist. It might be the plane returning from Harbister, and at once I felt myself involved again, and set off down the hill to go to the airfield and find out whether they had seen the launch. I had not much hope of getting there before it landed and the police left for the town, but it gave me something to do which I could think was important. I was still half a mile from the landing field when a police car passed me, stopped suddenly with a jar of brakes and began to reverse. Chief Constable McNarr beckoned me from it, and as it stopped another man jumped out of the further door. It was Charles, and he made no attempt to hide his pleasure at seeing me, a pleasure which caught me unawares and startled me into awkwardness. We met like childhood friends whose acquaintance is unaltered by the years between meetings, and I realised gratefully that it would always be so, for the experiences we had shared had the ineradicable force of childhood's impressions.

"They found the launch, Theresa," he said. "They're raising it now. The body's still in it."

"Get in and we'll give you a lift back to town," said the Chief Constable. "That is, if you were coming to meet us," he added.

"I was. I saw you coming in from the hill."

"You must have made good time coming down it." I met his eyes as I stepped into the car, and the glimmer of a smile showed in them. "Mr. Pomfret's story of course bears out your own," he said. "And as it happens, he was abroad when Mrs. Pomfret met her death, and has the dates stamped on his passport. There doesn't seem much left for us to do but to accept your theory. That was a clever thought, snapping Mr. Carmichael with the petrol," he added.

"Almost as if I'd guessed I'd need the documentary evidence," I supplied, and he laughed.

"Well, Miss Barr, I hope you bear me no ill will for my suspicious nature. Policemen have to be alarming, you know—the comedians insist on it. I think anyone would have a job pinning anything on to you—and of course I'm sure no officer of the law would ever have to try."

"If you stress my good citizenship again, Chief Constable, I shall begin to think you're being sarcastic."

"Well, how was Alison?" I asked, when we had left the police station and were walking along the road round the edge of the bay.

"Very quiet, of course."

"That's nothing unusual, from what I saw of her. She didn't exactly chatter at any time, did she? But how much do you think she knew about it all, and what did she tell you?"

"I don't think she *knew* anything," said Charles slowly. "She was determined not to find out, too. But

she suspected most of it. She swears Colin didn't kill Evadne—says he never went near her when she was ill, and left everything to her and Harry. She's all strung up and just about ripe for a breakdown, I should say, if she doesn't get away. I made Mrs. Flett see that in the end, and she's going to her aunt in Stromness till they've sold up on the island. The nurse has stayed behind with them, so I left them to it. I wasn't sorry to get away."

"Weren't you? I thought yesterday you were preparing to settle there."

"No thank you; I've no fancy for dead men's shoes. But just what do you mean by that?" he demanded, becoming suddenly aggressive.

"Nothing, only——"

"Only what?"

"Only I thought you were getting rather wrapped up in Alison."

"I had an idea that was what you thought," said Charles complacently. "So I let you think it."

"You felt nothing at all for her?"

"On the contrary, I felt a lot for her, a lot of apathy. I thought she was in a hell of a hole. And I thought she had a lovely face, and I admired it. But it doesn't mean that I wanted to marry her."

I thought I was even more disgusted by this aestheticachment than I had been by the idea of his infatuation. "It's the same with all you creative types," I explained. "Once you discover your emotions are worth money, you hoard them as if they were pawn tickets."

"There's just enough truth in that remark to make it rather offensive."

"We seem to quarrel every time we meet now," I said tedly.

"We must meet oftener, then, and see if we can't get over it. I think we might with time, don't you? Are you going back to London after the inquest?"

"Yes, if I've still got my return ticket." I had not thought of it for days, and I sat down on the low sea wall and turned out my purse to look for it. "I once thought you might murder me for that," I said, holding it up. There was a down-to-earth reality about the little green board which before his last remark would have made a tripper of me on the sight of it, so redolent it was of smoke and fog, of hurrying figures and rapt unseeing faces. But now London no longer seemed only the limbo which lies at every journey's end.

At the inquest a verdict was brought in of murder of Colin Carmichael by Harry Flett, deceased. Charles succeeded in selling two sketches to Dr. Finlay, on the proceeds of which we travelled south together.

We have never been back to Harbister, and the Flett left it very soon after. So now, I suppose, the dwelling there are derelict and its only inhabitants the wild and peevish sea birds of Stack Head and the starling roosting in the deserted hangars. But surely if birds have language they have also legends, and one perhaps will tell of the race of giants who once dwelt among them and of how they annihilated each other and left the land to the birds, and those monuments which shelter them from the sudden island storms.